

**MUSI 690 (MA THESIS)**

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## Table of contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| List of figures.....   | 3         |
| List of tables.....  | 5         |
| Acknowledgements.....  | 6         |
| <b>Introduction.....</b>   | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1 The Thaipusam festival.....</b>                                     | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Chapter 2 The Hindu Caste System.....</b>                                     | <b>14</b> |
| 2.1 <i>Brahmins</i> .....  | 15        |
| 2.2 <i>Kshatriyas</i> .....  | 16        |
| 2.3 <i>Vaishyas</i> .....  | 16        |
| 2.4 <i>Shudras</i> .....   | 17        |
| 2.5 <i>Dalits</i> .....  | 18        |
| <b>Chapter 3 The <i>Kavadi</i> Ritual .....</b>                                  | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Chapter 4 Importance of Music in the Thaipusam <i>Kavadi</i> Ritual .....</b> | <b>27</b> |
| 4.1 Musicians at the Thaipusam festival.....                                     | 27        |
| 4.2 Trance induction .....   | 31        |
| <b>Chapter 5 Musical instruments at the Thaipusam festival .....</b>             | <b>44</b> |
| 5.1 <u>Membranophones</u> .....  | 44        |
| 5.1.1 <i>Tavil</i> .....   | 46        |
| 5.1.2 <i>Urumi melam</i> .....   | 48        |
| 5.1.3 <i>Tappu</i> .....   | 50        |
| 5.2 <u>Aerophones</u> .....  | 51        |
| 5.2.1 <i>Nadaswaram</i> .....  | 52        |
| 5.2.2 <i>Kombu</i> .....   | 54        |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 5.2.3 <i>Sanggu</i> .....  | 56  |
| 5.3 <u>Idiophones</u> .....  | 57  |
| 5.3.1 <i>Jalra</i> .....   | 58  |
| 5.3.2 <i>Salangai</i> .....  | 60  |
| 5.4 <u>Singing</u> .....   | 61  |
| <b>Chapter 6 Different caste styles of music in the <i>kavadi</i> ritual</b> ..... | 63  |
| 6.1 <u>Brahmin</u> .....   | 63  |
| 6.1.1 <i>Manmadannukku</i> (For The Handsome One).....                             | 66  |
| 6.2 <u>Kshatriya</u> .....   | 78  |
| 6.2.1 <i>Munthi Munthi</i> (Song for Lord Ganesh) .....                            | 79  |
| 6.3 <u>Vaishya</u> .....   | 86  |
| 6.3.1 <i>Namana Orrou Urumi Melam</i> (Our Country's <i>Urumi</i> Music) .....     | 87  |
| 6.4 <u>Shudra</u> .....  | 89  |
| 6.4.1 <i>Shudra</i> drumming sample .....  | 91  |
| 6.5 <u>Dalit</u> .....   | 92  |
| 6.5.1 <i>Dalit</i> drumming sample .....   | 93  |
| <b>Chapter 7 The Future of the Music at the Thaipusam Festival</b> .....           | 94  |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....  | 99  |
| <b>Bibliography</b> .....  | 103 |
| <b>Appendix I</b> .....  | 109 |
| <b>Appendix II</b> .....   | 111 |
| <b>Appendix III</b> .....  | 126 |
| <b>Appendix IV</b> .....   | 137 |
| <b>Appendix V</b> .....  | 141 |
| <b>Appendix VI</b> .....   | 142 |

## List of figures

|  |       |
|--|-------|
| <b>Figure 1</b> – Stairway leading to the Batu Cave Temple (272 steps), and the 140 foot statue of Lord Murugan, erected in 2006 ..... | 11    |
| <b>Figure 2</b> – Angelita Malicia and her <i>kavadi</i> in 2005.....  | 26    |
| <b>Figure 3</b> – Front view of a <i>tavil</i> used in the Thaipusam festival.....   | 46    |
| <b>Figures 4 and 5</b> – Two views of an <i>urumi melam</i> being played at the Thaipusam festival.....                                | 48    |
| <b>Figures 6 and 7</b> – Front and back views of a <i>tappu</i> drum, which is used in the Thaipusam festival.....                     | 50    |
| <b>Figure 8</b> – <i>Nadaswaram</i> .....  | 52    |
| <b>Figure 9</b> – An ‘S’ shaped <i>kombu</i> being played during a trance induction ceremony at a Thaipusam festival .....             | 54    |
| <b>Figures 10 to 12</b> – Young <i>sanggu</i> player blowing his instrument .....  | 56    |
| <b>Figure 13</b> – A close up of a <i>jalra</i> used in the Thaipusam festival .....   | 58    |
| <b>Figure 14</b> – <i>Chimta</i> used in the 2006 Thaipusam festival by a mixed caste musicians group .....                            | 59    |
| <b>Figure 15</b> – A pair of <i>salangai</i> .....   | 60    |
| <b>Figure 16</b> – <i>Kshatriya</i> caste singer, with megaphone and small-hand held microphone at the Thaipusam festival .....        | 61    |
| <b>Figure 17</b> – An extract of the <i>mohara</i> , the first three bars of <i>Manmadanakku</i> .....                                 | 67    |
| <b>Figure 18</b> – Extract of <i>Manmadanukku</i> showing variations in phrases from the <i>nadaswaram</i> part, section 1 .....       | 68    |
| <b>Figure 19</b> – Extract of <i>Manmadanukku</i> showing variations in phrases from the <i>nadaswaram</i> part, section 2 .....       | 69    |
| <b>Figure 20</b> – Examples of pattern (A) and pattern (B) .....   | 70    |
| <b>Figure 21</b> – Extract showing the return of pattern a (A) after pattern (C) .....   | 71    |
| <b>Figure 22</b> – Extract of pattern D, on <i>Laghu-druta talam</i> .....   | 71    |
| <b>Figure 23</b> - Extracts showing the wide range of different <i>tavil</i> patterns.....   | 72-74 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Figure 24</b> – Extract showing an example of silence being employed by <i>nadaswaram</i> two in the song <i>Manmadanakku</i> (bars 68-70).....  | 75 |
| <b>Figure 25</b> – percussion alone (bar 71-73) .....   | 76 |
| <b>Figure 26</b> - <i>Nadaswarams</i> playing in unison (bar 45-47) .....   | 76 |
| <b>Figure 27</b> - <i>Nadaswarams</i> playing heterophonically (bar 49-56) .....  | 76 |
| <b>Figure 28</b> – Extract showing the use of trills, found only in section one (bar 45-61) of <i>Manmadanakku</i> .....  | 77 |
| <b>Figure 29</b> – Extract showing the use of microtonality by both <i>nadaswarams</i> (bar 53-55).....   | 77 |
| <b>Figure 30</b> – Extract showing the first three bars of <i>Munthi munthi</i> starting in a 6/4 time signature.....   | 80 |
| <b>Figure 31</b> – Extract showing the quadruple time of <i>Munthi Munthi</i> , in which the majority of the piece is set .....   | 81 |
| <b>Figure 32</b> - Extract showing the change from quadruple to duple grouping in bar 43.....   | 81 |
| <b>Figure 33</b> – Extract showing the simple melody of <i>Munthi Munthi</i> , this style is sustained throughout the piece.....  | 82 |
| <b>Figure 34</b> - Extract showing the drumming pattern in <i>Munthi Munthi</i> , which is constant throughout the majority of the piece.....   | 86 |
| <b>Figure 35</b> – The two principal rhythmic patterns of <i>Munthi Munthi</i> .....  | 86 |
| <b>Figure 36</b> - Extract showing the first three bars of <i>Namma Orru Urumi Melam</i> .....  | 87 |
| <b>Figure 37</b> – Extract from <i>Namma Orru Urumi Melam</i> showing the rhythm of the <i>salangai</i> on beats one and three, and the time signature change from 4/4 to 2/4 and back to 4/4 in section E..... | 89 |
| <b>Figure 38</b> - Extract of the first three bars of a <i>Shudra</i> caste drumming pattern, showing the introduction by the <i>tappu</i> .....  | 91 |
| <b>Figure 39</b> - Extract showing sections (B) and (C), with the use of triplets by the <i>tavil</i> , and by the <i>salangai</i> in bars six and seven.....   | 92 |
| <b>Figure 40</b> – <i>Dalit</i> drumming sample .....   | 93 |

## List of tables

**Table 1** - Chart showing the state of trance in relation to caste *kavadi* music .....31

**Table 2** - The structure and analysis of *Munthi Munthi* .....80

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## Introduction

The Thaipusam festival, which takes place over three days at the Batu Caves near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is a Hindu festival of devotion to Lord Muruga. Devotees, often while in a trance state, bear *kavadi* (offerings of milk, structures bearing offerings and pictures of gods, or piercings of the body), for approximately one kilometre from the Batu River to a temple in the Batu Caves. The festival is held in other major temples in the twelve states of Malaysia, however the festivities at the Batu Caves is most popular as the location is central to two of these states, Wilayah Persekutuan, and Selangor Darul Ehsan.

At the festival, recorded devotional music is played over loudspeakers, and, more important for trance induction, live music is played for the devotees from the river until the start of the stairway to the temple in the Batu Caves. Each caste has its own musicians and music, with the exception of ‘super groups,’ which can consist of musicians from any caste.

The following body of work examines the music of the Thaipusam festival. In the first chapter, an overview of the festival is given, followed in Chapter 2 by an explanation of the Hindu caste system in Malaysia. This is necessary as the caste system of *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, *Shudras* and *Dalits*, defines different roles and procedures for the members of each level, and this definition extends to the Thaipusam festival - most evident in the differing styles of music each caste plays. The focus and conclusions of this work are in sole regard to the Malaysian Thaipusam festival, which takes place at the Batu Caves, not the Thaipusam festivals that occur in other places such as South India or Singapore. The Thaipusam festivities at the Batu Caves differ from the South Indian, as the latter are more subdued in nature. The Singapore festivities are on a much smaller scale than those held in Malaysia.



Chapter 3 deals with the main event of the Thaipusam festival - the carrying of offerings, called *kavadi*, by devotees of the god Lord Muruga, from the Batu River to a temple inside the Batu Caves. A description and explanation of the ceremonies, which occur at the festival, both at the start of the procession at the river and at the end in the temple, are necessary to show the reader the nature of the festival and the relationship between these events and the music.

During the procession, from the river to the temple, the devotees are accompanied by musicians. The status, function, relationship to the devotees, and practices of the musicians at Thaipusam are explained in Chapter 4, including the nature of their groups, the rules guiding them at the festival, and the preparation they undergo prior to the festival. Musicians are restricted to playing music for devotees of their own caste, with an exception of mixed ‘supergroups’, which consist of a number of musicians from various castes playing for a *kavadi* bearer.

The devotees bearing the *kavadi* proceed up to the Batu Caves temple in a state of trance. The main purpose of this thesis is to show that the live music played during the procession from the river is the most important factor for inducing this trance state in the devotees. It will be shown that preparation for the festival Hindu belief, the devotee’s mindset, and external factors contributing to over-stimulation of the senses are also important factors for trance induction. Examples are taken from other cultures to show a similar relationship between live music and trance states. It is not the author’s intention to give a scientific or psychological analysis of the trance state, other than its relation to the music.

The musical instruments used by the various castes at Thaipusam are shown in Chapter 5 and then each religious caste’s music is examined in Chapter 6. Here, examples of representative pieces from each caste have been transcribed. Both South

Indian terminology and Western musical transcription are used. Because of the *guru-shiysha* system, where teaching is by rote, it is necessary to provide transcription of the pieces in Western notation. These pieces have no Malaysian or even South Indian music notation, although words of vocal pieces may be written down. The terminology for the use of South Indian terms such as *talam* and *ragam*, which is used in some pieces, is also used in both South Indian and the Western system for the same reason. The pieces have been transcribed using the Western musical notation system so that an analysis could be undertaken in order to compare the difference in style between each caste's music at the festival.

The future of the music at Thaipusam is discussed at the end of the paper, where the author predicts that musicians will always be present at the festival, despite increasing hostility from the public towards them.

The author has attended approximately twelve Thaipusam festivals, since he was a child in Malaysia, has studied footage from many more, and has also used a wide range of written material to support the findings of this thesis. More intensive fieldwork was undertaken in 2006 on which the accompanying DVD is based and during which the CDs were collected. Twenty-one interviews were carried out while the ceremony was being captured on video. These interviews were done in three major Malaysian languages which are Malay, Tamil and Cantonese. Musicians were asked about their instruments, how they learned to play the instrument, what the protocols were while they are in the festival, the average time they practise their instruments, their belief in the festival and the possibility for the festival to go on without them. The musicians were also asked about how they feel about the restriction of not being allowed to the hill-top temple with their instruments, and musicians being called a "public nuisance". The author was brought up in Malaysia,

and as a Hindu Tamil has a good understanding of the meaning and importance of the Thaipusam festival in a personal context. However, these interviews gave valuable insight into “insider” perspectives on the festival, as the author has never carried a *kavadi* or played music at Thaipusam himself. As “insiders”, the musicians and participants have a view of the festival and trance induction based on firm Hindu religious beliefs, whereas the author, and other audience members, have a more subjective view.

Trance inductors, inducees, members of the public, policemen/ women and two Brahmin, Hindu priests were asked the significance of music in the Thaipusam festival and whether the festival would still go on without the presence of music and what could happen if music is completely banned in the future.

## 1. The Thaipusam Festival

Thaipusam, which is also known as *Tai Pucam*, is an annual Hindu festival celebrated in *Thaimatham* i.e., the month which falls between January 14 to February 14, beginning on a day of a full moon, which is called *pusam*. This festival of faith and forgiveness is celebrated in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Fiji, New Zealand and South Africa. The biggest and most famous celebration takes place at the Batu Caves, Malaysia. Situated in Selangor, thirteen kilometers north of Kuala Lumpur, the Batu Caves are made of limestone and are filled with life-sized statues of Lord Muruga, Shiva and Shakti. Thaipusam is celebrated by all Hindu castes from the highest *Brahmin*, to the lowest *Dalits*. Ethnically not only the Indians (North Indian Punjabi, Bengali and Sikhs and South Indian Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu) and Sri Lankan (Tamil and Singhalese) but

some Chinese and European devotees share the Thaipusam spirit. Participants come from all age groups and social status for this pilgrimage, which lasts for three days.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1 - Stairway leading to the Batu Cave Temple (272 steps), and the 140 foot statue of Lord Murugan, erected in 2006.

Thaipusam was first celebrated in Malaysia at the Batu Caves in 1891. It originated when, Mother Parvathi, also known as Shakti (wife of Shiva – mother of Lord Muruga), appeared in Kayaroganam Pillai's (a devotee of Shakti) dream and instructed him to build a temple for Her Son, Lord Muruga. Kayaroganam Pillai, together with a friend, Kandappa Thevar, later placed a *vel* (lance of Lord Muruga) in the Batu Caves and began praying to it. In 1891, plans were made to celebrate the Thaipusam festival annually. However, Kuala Lumpur's then District Officer, upon

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson Fox, dir. *Shocking Asia*, Hong Kong, Germany, 80 min, VHS, 1975.

hearing about the new temple in the Batu Caves, instructed the *vel* to be removed and the prayer sessions stopped. Angered by his instruction, the local people brought the matter to the courts and were later legally given permission to proceed with their prayers. From then onwards, the success story of the Batu Caves Temple began. On the first day of Thaipusam, early in the morning a golden statue of Lord Muruga (son of Lord Shiva - the dancer and destroyer) is paraded on a twenty-one foot tall, twenty ton silver plated chariot for thirteen kilometres, from the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, which is situated in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, to his home in the mountains at the Batu Caves. The *kavadi* ritual starts at the Batu River, approximately one kilometre below the Batu Caves temple.<sup>2</sup> The following describes Lord Muruga's role and his lance in the Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

The theme of conquest, submission, and service also appears in the other legend most commonly told in connection with the Thaipusam festival, the story of Muruga's victory over the demon Surapadma. Having been granted the boon of immortality by Shiva because of his great austerities, Surapadma led a rebellion of *asuras* (demons) against the high gods. The gods realized that only a son of Shiva would be able to defeat the powerful demon, and they conspired that Muruga be conceived. Muruga is given an invincible weapon by his mother, the goddess, and he then sets off to fight Surapadma and his allies. Throughout the battle, Surapadma takes different forms of order to gain an advantage over the god. Muruga strikes back at each form, but he cannot destroy the boon granted by Shiva. Finally, Surapadma takes the form of a tree, which Muruga splits with his lance (*vel*). One part of the tree becomes a rooster and the other a peacock. In these two forms, the demon is subdued and comes to serve Muruga.<sup>3</sup>

Thaipusam is a celebration of "Good" (Idumban) over "Evil" (Surapadma). This transformation from Surapadma into Idumban is followed as an example by

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<sup>2</sup>M. Krishnamoorthy et al. *Thaipusam*, Kuala Lumpur: The Star Publication, 1996, p. 1-15

<sup>3</sup> Fred W Clothey *The Many Faces of Murukan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God*, The Hague: Mouton, 1978, p.3-24

devotees – who carry their burden, in the form of a *kavadi*, to be blessed by the spiritual Divine.<sup>4</sup>

During the Thaipusam ceremony, every Hindu devotee practises certain purification rites. Men, women and children from all castes physically, mentally and spiritually prepare themselves in a number of ways. This includes day long fasting - eating only one meal a day (strictly vegetarian), conducting prayers every day at home and at the temple, abstaining from carnal pleasures, observing *mounam* (silence) as far as possible, even enduring personal hardships such as sleeping on a bare floor. All of these preparations can continue for up to a month. However, many do not observe such long periods of purification, and the more experienced pilgrims may fast for only seven days. Through these practices the devotees get ready to fulfill their *kavadi* ritual.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p.3-24

## 2. The Hindu Caste System

Because the music surrounding the Thaipusam ceremony differs depending on the caste of the musicians and participants for whom it is performed, the following outline of the Hindu caste system is necessary.

The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word *Casta* which means pure. Caste is an institution which is truly Hindu in character, and has a history extending back through many centuries. Caste origin goes back to three or four millennia, to the time when tribal Aryans roamed the plains of Central Asia before reaching India.<sup>5</sup> The ancient Sanskrit text, *Rig Veda*, divides Hindu society into *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (cultivators) and *Shudras* (peasants).<sup>6</sup> Hindus are said to have been created by a supreme being, *Purusha* (God). From *Purusha's* brain emerged the *Brahmins*, from his forearms emerged the *Kshatriyas*, from his abdomen emerged the *Vaishyas*, and from his feet emerged the *Shudras*. A fifth group describes the people who are the *Dalits*, *achuta*, also known as the untouchables. Untouchables are outcasts considered too impure and too polluted, to rank as worthy beings.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class, and Power*, Los Angeles: UCLA, 1965, p.20-35.

<sup>6</sup> E R Leach, *Aspects of caste in South India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan*, C.U.P, 1971 p.5-15.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Berreman, *Caste And Other Inequities*, New Delhi: Folklore Inst., 1979, p.23-30.

## 2.1 *Brahmins*

Historically, *Brahmin* philosophers and priests have played a key role in defining and giving meaning to the Hindu way of life. In modern times *Brahmins* (those from India and now in Malaysia), still trace their roots back to the Aryans and keep their blood pure from being mixed by other castes.

“When I was a boy of about eight, I had once accompanied my father to visit a card-playing friend of his, a *Brahmin*. He was not in and whilst waiting for him, his wife brought glasses of coffee for us. Later, after my father's friend had arrived, I learnt by accident that the glasses we had drunk out of were smashed to pieces. It was customary, then, for non-*Brahmins* to be served out of glass cups and *Brahmins* from stainless-steel cups. Otherwise, the household would have been polluted. That etched in my mind the strict Brahmanic code that insisted on separate cooking for *Brahmins* and non-*Brahmins* eating in the same house, and other social prohibitions”<sup>8</sup>

Although the *Brahmin* influence is waning, *Brahmins* who remain true to their heritage continue to influence Hindu society, in religious, social and cultural matters. *Brahmins* have shaped Hindu structures, belief systems, mythology and patterns of worship in Malaysia. The *Brahmin* caste can be divided into two categories, the priestly *Brahmins* who serve the gods in the temples, and ordinary *Brahmins*, who are not bound to the same strict rules as those of the priestly order. *Brahmins* in the latter category can do things not permitted to the priestly order, such as becoming surgeons (touching blood or corpses is not allowed for higher *Brahmins*), or musicians dedicated to their own caste.

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<sup>8</sup> M.G.G Pillai, *Experience with Brahmins*, [www.sangkancil.malaysia.net](http://www.sangkancil.malaysia.net), data downloaded 03/07/03.



## 2.2 *Kshatriyas*

*Kshatriya* literally means 'protector of gentle people'. Second in the social hierarchy of the caste system, the *Kshatriyas* were kings and warriors. Having evolved from the arms of *Purusha*, their role in society was the protection of people and livestock. The Hindus maintain that only a *Kshatriya* had the right to rule, though *Brahmin* rulers are not unknown. They were supposed to be brave and fearless, and to live and die by a code of honor and loyalty. They could eat meat and drink liquor and their most exalted death was to die in battle. The Buddhist religion was founded by a *Kshatriya* - Prince Siddhartha, later known as Gautama Buddha. In spite of his royal and military background, Buddha preached the message of peace and non-violence and preached against observing caste distinctions.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.3 *Vaishyas*

Third in the caste system are *Vaishyas*, who supposedly evolved from *Purusha's* abdomen. The *Vaishya's* duty was to ensure the community's prosperity through agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade. Later, the *Shudras* took over agriculture and cattle-rearing while the *Vaishyas* became traders and merchants.<sup>10</sup> The *Vaishyas* were then commonly known as *vanik* (Sanskrit). In southern India, the *Chettiars* (money lenders) and *Mudaliars* (traders), both prominent members of the *Vaishya* communities, have contributed to society by building hospitals and universities, and developing industries. While the fortunes of the other castes have fluctuated with politics and invasions, the *Vaishyas* alone have preserved their social and financial

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<sup>9</sup> Andre Beteille, p. 36-48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67-78.

stability down the ages. In the last century, some of the most prominent *Vaishya* merchants and philanthropists came from the region of Gujarat and Sindh. Many of them funded Mahatma Gandhi's freedom movement and later evolved into modern India's leading industrialists.

## 2.4 *Shudras*

*Shudra* is a term thought to have been derived from the Sanskrit word '*such*', meaning to be afflicted. Many theories have been propounded over the origin of this class. When the Aryans came to India, they were already divided into three fluid classes by way of profession. As the fair-skinned conquerors, Aryans considered themselves superior to the dark-skinned native people, who became a subject race in their own land.<sup>11</sup> A *Shudra* enjoyed no rights or privileges. He was not permitted to perform any sacrifices or *homa* (prayers in temple), read or learn the *Vedas* or recite the *mantras* (Hindu chants). A *Shudra* could only marry another *Shudra*. Because of these strict and harsh social regulations, the *Shudras* were very supportive of the anti-Brahminical sects that evolved around the sixth century BC. Later, they also converted in large numbers to Islam and Christianity, finding solace in the egalitarianism preached by these faiths.

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<sup>11</sup> Gerald Berreman, p. 25.

## 2.5 Dalits

More than 160 million people in India are considered "untouchable" - people tainted by their birth into a caste system that deems them impure, less than human. Human rights abuses against these people, known as *Dalits*, are well-known. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story:

“*"Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers"; "Dalit tortured by cops for three days"; "Dalit 'witch' paraded naked in Bihar"; "Dalit killed in lock-up at Kurnool"; "7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash"; "5 Dalits lynched in Haryana"; "Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked"; "Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits". "Dalits are not allowed to drink from the same wells, attend the same temples, wear shoes in the presence of an upper caste, or drink from the same cups in tea stalls," said Smita Narula, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, and author of *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."*”<sup>12</sup> In Malaysia the distinctions between the groups in the Hindu caste system are not so obvious in every day life. It is only when important events occur, such as marriage and temple festivals such as Thaipusam or Thuruvara (a yearly temple anniversary), that they become obvious.*

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<sup>12</sup> <http://news.nationalgeographic.com>, data downloaded 18/07/04.

### 3. The *Kavadi* Ritual

The theme of conquest, submission, and service in the story of the change of Surapadma into Idumban is reflected in the *kavadi* ritual. The word *kavadi* literally means ‘burden’ and Idumban was the first to carry a *kavadi*, which in his case was two hills balanced on a pole. He carried these to his home in the south of India in order to get a blessing from Lord Muruga.

Approximately one million devotees and tourists<sup>13</sup> attend the procession of the *kavadi*. *Kavadi* comes from a Tamil (South Indian language) word, *kavati*, which describes anything that can be suspended on the body (pole, hooks and chains). The word also describes offerings and devotional practices at the Thaipusam festival, such as carrying a *vel*, a knife, wooden or metal structures, or carrying a milk-pot offering up the two hundred and seventy-two steps to the cave temple. Couples who have recently been blessed with a baby carry the infant in a saffron-colored sarong, slung between sugarcane poles. Today, ‘*kavadi*’ is more likely to mean a semi-circular structure that is decorated with flowers, peacock feathers and palm leaves. It usually bears a *vel*, which represents Lord Muruga’s lance.<sup>14</sup> By carrying or placing a burden, devotees publicly demonstrate their wish to be freed from bad energy, forgiven and shown grace by Lord Muruga. They carry their *kavadi* to fulfill their personal wishes e.g., recovery from illness, birth of a baby, reconciliation within a family, economic stability or marriage etc.. As part of the ritual, some devotees shave

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<sup>13</sup> Official figure of attendance at the Thaipusam Festival in 2003 [www.rotarybrickfields.com](http://www.rotarybrickfields.com), data downloaded 15/07/03.

<sup>14</sup> Carl Belle (also known as Vadivella) *Toward Truth: An Australian Spiritual Journey*, Kuala Lumpur: Pacific Press, 1992, p. 23.

their heads, and those of their children, and bear offerings of fruit and milk and bathe in the nearby Batu River.<sup>15</sup>

Not all *kavadi* are borne for Lord Muruga. The *Brahmin* caste devotees carry their *kavadi* for *Brahmin* Gods such as Krishna, Brahma and Shiva – together known as the *Trimurthis*. Devotees from the four remaining castes would either make their *kavadi* offering for Lord Muruga, the three *Brahmin Trimurthis*, or choose to offer their *kavadi* to other Hindu deities such as Kali (Goddess of destruction), Muniandi (the cigar smoking village God), or Sangali Karuppun (God of freedom). It is important to note that in this instance, Hinduism in Malaysia is not as strict as traditional sources of Hindu authority from India.<sup>16</sup> In Malaysia, the different castes have more freedom as to which gods they make their offerings at Thaipusam, whereas in India, and other countries that celebrate Thaipusam, the distinctions are kept more distinct.

If they are of the *Brahmin* caste, devotees carry their offerings on their head or shoulders, such as the young boy participating in the 2006 Thaipusam festival at the Batu Caves who carried a wooden structure on one shoulder which was decorated with green leaves, peacock feathers and a picture of Lord Muruga. *Brahmin kavadi* have various forms, including a *pushpa kavadi* ('flower' *kavadi*) carried by both men and women. This is a wooden arch decorated with flowers, greenery, fruit, peacock feathers, and a picture of the *Trimurthis* or Lord Muruga. Other common *Brahmin kavadi* are larger versions of the *pushpa kavadi* – heavy metal frames decorated in the same manner and borne on the shoulders. This larger version is carried by men only.

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<sup>15</sup> Gail Saari, *Hooked on Thaipusam*, San Francisco: Salon Media Groups, 1998, p. 1-37.

<sup>16</sup> Rakhal Chandra Nath, *The New Hindu Movement 1886-1911*, India: anonymous publisher, 1982, p. 56-58.

*Kshatriya* (warrior) caste male devotee's *kavadi* are mini chariots that are decorated with lemons and flowers and are attached to their shoulders by hooks which pierce the skin. This type of *kavadi* is called *allagu kavadi* ('beautiful' *kavadi*). One example was at the 2006 Thaipusam festival at the Batu Caves. A *Kshatriya* man bore a *kavadi* of this type - a chariot which seated his wife and two children inside. The height of these chariots is now restricted to 2.13 metres for the safety of the public, previously there was not a specified limit to the height of the structures.<sup>17</sup> Women from the *Kshatriya* caste can bear *kavadi* of pots of milk on their heads (*paal kavadi*), and can also pierce their tongues – known as *mounam kavadi* ('silent' *kavadi*).

Men and women from the *Vaishya* (cultivator) caste bear *veera kavadi* ('noble and strong' *kavadi*). These are metal skewers of various lengths (from less than 30 centimetres, and previously up to four metres wide, though length is now restricted to 30 centimetres), which pierce both cheeks or the lips. Sometimes male devotees pierce the skin of the back with small hooks bearing bells or fruit such as apples, oranges or limes.

Men from the *Shudra* (peasant) caste have *kavadi* known as *ratham kavadi* ('blood' *kavadi*). This type of *kavadi* consists of hooks which pierce the skin of the back and are attached to rope or chain. A friend or relative would hold these ropes or chains and travel with the devotee to the temple. Some male devotees from this caste may only travel to the temple bearing a *kavadi* of a simple cigar and *parang* (machete) for the god Muniandi, or a cigar and chain for the god Sangali Karuppun. Women can have *kavadi*, of facial piercings, and can carry pots with burning coal inside, which are sprinkled with incense to make smoke. The women wear black *saris*

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<sup>17</sup> [www.hindutemples.com](http://www.hindutemples.com), data downloaded 21/05/05.

(traditional Hindu dress) for this, and wear their hair unbound to impersonate the goddess Kali.

The *Dalit* (untouchable) caste devotees have similar *kavadi* to the *Shudra* caste. However, there was one *kavadi* solely for the men of the *Dalit* caste, the *katti kavadi* ('knife' *kavadi*). This is where two people would hold either end of a long (approximately two metres), heavy knife and the *Dalit* devotee would stand upon it with bare feet and hold on to the shoulders of the helpers. The devotee would then be paraded, standing on the knife, to the temple at the base of the Batu Caves. This particular *kavadi* is now banned at the Malaysian Thaipusam festival. Women of the *Dalit* caste have *kavadi* similar to the women of the *Shudra* caste.

Devotees of any caste can shave their head and put saffron paste on their bald head as an offering to Lord Muruga. Even young babies in the first year of life can have this done for them, as a blessing. The shaving of the head is done by barbers who set up stalls in tents at the festival. People who have had a death in the family are not permitted to carry a *kavadi* until one year has passed, because it is said that the deceased's soul shouldn't be disturbed by a family member undertaking a celebratory religious ritual.

The piercing for the *kavadi* is done by a trance inductor, who must be a Hindu priest. Each caste has its own priest for this. No formal qualifications or training are necessary, though the priests are taught how to carry out the piercing and trance induction by more senior priests. There are no notable safety or hygiene restrictions such as wearing gloves, or swabbing the area to be pierced with alcohol. Instead, the priest rinses his hands in lemon water, and powders the area to be pierced with *vibuthi*, holy ash made from cow dung. Music is played during the piercing and trance induction. The *kavadi* bearer often shows no sign of pain or bleeding during the

piercing. The piercings are removed once the devotee reaches the hill top temple in the Batu Cave and comes out of the trance, when the *kavadi* is removed as an offering to Lord Muruga. Prior to 1999, devotees bearing *kavadi* would smear *kum kum*, a red powder made from dried turmeric and lime, on their body, face or tongue to simulate the appearance of blood, in imitation of the goddess Kali. This practice was banned after 1999 as it was seen as a blasphemy although some devotees do not adhere to this restriction and still continue to use *kum kum* on their bodies.<sup>18</sup>

People generally buy their *kavadi*, *kavadi* accessories, special saffron coloured clothing, saris, fruit for offerings, incense, pictures of Muruga and other gods, and all other items necessary for the *kavadi* ritual from 'Little India' – the Indian markets situated in central Kuala Lumpur. The larger *kavadi* are often pre-made, though some devotees also have them custom made according to their own designs. The materials for decorating the *kavadi*, such as peacock feathers, are often imported from India. Last minute purchases for the *kavadi* ritual can be obtained from the stalls set up around the Batu Caves and Batu River, during the Thaipusam festival.

There are no age restrictions for devotees who carry *kavadi* such as milk-pots or *pushpa kavadi* - even children can carry these. Any *kavadi* which involves body piercing, standing on knives, or has large, heavy frames is restricted to people who have passed through puberty, as people younger than this are not fully developed spiritually or physically.<sup>19</sup> Men and women offer *kavadi* in approximately equal numbers, though the type of *kavadi* they offer differs. Women are more likely to carry milk-pot *kavadi* and wear saffron coloured clothes (traditionally this colour is

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<sup>18</sup> Nalamah Ramasamy (Tamil school teacher), Kuala Lumpur, interviewed 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Nalamah Ramasamy (Tamil school teacher), Kuala Lumpur, interviewed 2006.



associated with fertility), whereas men often carry the larger-framed *kavadi* or those involving body piercing.

Before the start of the Thaipusam festival, people of all castes who intend to carry *kavadi* at the Batu Caves do not have to go through any strict processes or interviews with Hindu priests. Nor do they have to be of a high spiritual standing within Hindu society. People can make arrangements beforehand with specific musicians and a Hindu priest of their own caste to induce their trance, but they can also just show up on the day and hire both musicians and priests by the Batu River – where musicians and priests of all castes are always available for the duration of the three day festival. Anybody who has a vow to fulfill or a request to make can carry *kavadi* at the Thaipusam festival at the Batu Caves.

People who intend to carry *kavadi* have to pay for tickets in advance. It can cost from approximately twelve to one hundred and twenty New Zealand dollars, depending what type of *kavadi* is carried. *Veera kavadi* and chariot *kavadi* are the most expensive, at around one hundred New Zealand dollars.

During the festival devotees dance their way up to the temple on the hill, lost in trance. They dance rhythmically – nodding their head, swaying their body, and stamping their feet to make the bells on their ankles (called *salangai*) sound. Once the devotees reach the temple top, they come back to reality and the offering that they brought for Lord Muruga is given to the temple priest. This act of pouring out the milk, fruit or honey is accompanied by the pouring out of love from the heart, thereby cleansing the devotee's sins.<sup>20</sup>

There is evidence in other cultures of festivals similar to Thaipusam. One such festival is the Chinese Vegetarian Festival held in Phuket, Thailand, in late

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<sup>20</sup> Sivabalan (Thaipusam devotee) interviewed, Kuala Lumpur, 2003.

September or October. The preparation for this festival is much like that undertaken by devotees prior to Thaipusam – for example, abstaining from sex and eating meat. There are also processions, offerings to the gods, and acts of self-mortification much like that seen in the *kavadi* ritual at Thaipusam. Those participating will go into a trance state while listening to musicians play drums and other instruments, and will have their cheeks or the skin of their bodies pierced, some even cut their tongues with blades. Some historians believe that this festival was influenced by the Thaipusam festival due to the remarkable similarities.<sup>21</sup>

The *kavadi* ritual has also been adopted into some forms of popular culture. For example, in a Dee Snider movie '*Strange Land*', there is a scene where a person is killed in a ritualistic manner based on the *kavadi* ritual, with *kavadi* spears being stabbed into the victim's body. The character even mentions what he is basing the action on – "Let me perform to you the art of *kavadi*. . .".<sup>22</sup> The *kavadi* ritual is also a fascination for many non-Hindu westerners, some of whom even attempt to undertake the ritual themselves, though not at Thaipusam. An Argentinean woman, Angelita Malicia, undertook a *pushpa kavadi* ritual in 2005 after meeting her husband, who had past experience of the ritual himself. It is very unusual for a woman to bear a *pushpa kavadi*. Angelita Malicia did not undertake the *kavadi* ritual at Thaipusam or in any sort of Hindu religious context. In this case the purpose was for artistic expression and to explore how the mind reacts to such intense physical challenge.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Erik Cohen, "The Chinese Vegetarian Festival In Phuket: Religion, Ethnicity, And Tourism On A Southern Thai Island", *Pacific Affairs*, 76, 3, Autumn 2003, p.504.

<sup>22</sup> Dee Snider dir., *Strange Land*, Colorado, 91 min, VHS, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Angelita Malicia, email interview, 14 October 2006.



Figure 2 - Angelita Malicia and her *kavadi* in 2005.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Picture taken by Jergan Malicia, Argentina, 2005.

## 4. Importance of Music in the Thaipusam *Kavadi* Ritual

### 4.1 Musicians at the Thaipusam festival

The *kavadi* bearers are induced into a trance by a priest, while bands of musicians play. The musicians must be male, as it is traditionally a male dominated practice at Thaipusam, and they must have passed through puberty, this being the only age restriction. Women are not permitted to play music at the festival due to the possibility of them playing while they are menstruating. This could be intimidating for the *kavadi*-bearers undergoing trance induction as a menstruating musician would be offensive to the gods. However, at the 2006 Thaipusam festival a woman from the *Dalit* caste was observed playing a *tappu* while a man of the same caste held the drum for her.

The musicians, like the *kavadi* bearers, must have prepared for Thaipusam by fasting, and abstaining from sex, smoking, and drinking alcohol. However, from observation at the 2004, 2005, and 2006 Thaipusam festivals musicians don't always adhere to these restrictions, as some musicians from the lower castes (*Shudras* and *Dalits*) were seen to be smoking and drinking alcohol. The musicians usually get paid in advance, though they can be paid at the festival itself if they are hired there by someone who needs their services. Payment is from fifty to one hundred New Zealand dollars for musicians to play while following the *kavadi* bearer from the Batu River to the stairs leading to the Batu Cave temple. Musicians can sometimes play for free for family members or close friends who want to carry a *kavadi*.

Most musicians are matched to a *kavadi* bearer of the same caste – for example, *Kshatriya* musicians play for *kavadi* bearers of the *Kshatriya* caste, but not for someone of the *Shudra* caste. People from the *Brahmin* caste differ in that there are generally no musicians available from this caste. Instead, *Brahmin* devotees hire

musicians from the *isai vellarar* caste – the musician caste, which is a sub-group of the *Brahmin* caste. However, these traditions restricting devotees to musicians of the same caste are changing. At the 2006 Thaipusam festival, groups could be seen which were made up of musicians from all castes utilizing various styles of Thaipusam music and musical instruments, here called ‘super groups’.

The musicians practise and promote their music near the Batu River by playing to the crowd and encouraging people to hire them, and then follow a *kavadi* bearer in procession once hired. Breaks are occasionally taken during the journey to the hill top temple in the Batu Cave when the *kavadi* bearer stops to rest for a very short time. The musicians also take a break at this time, and they give the cue (usually a nod of the head or a hand gesture) for the music to start again once the *kavadi* bearer’s accompanying family member or friend has given their approval.

Musicians’ motivation for playing at the Thaipusam festival can differ. Many play primarily to earn money, as it pays well – even up to the equivalent of an average month’s salary. They can also do it as a favour to a friend or family member, and some have similar a motivation towards *kavadi* bearers because the *kavadi* music can be a form of offering to Lord Muruga or other gods, or fulfilling a vow.<sup>25</sup> Musicians can train for the Thaipusam festival for five months to a year in advance.<sup>26</sup> Some are professional musicians who are usually hired for *kavadi* bearers of the *Brahmin* caste, but most are those who play music in their spare time. The musicians are normally self-taught, or trained by friends or family members. Most practice is done at home with a group, and sometimes at temples and through youth groups.

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<sup>25</sup> Anbu Segaran (Urumi Melam), musician, interviewed at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>26</sup> Kalai Vasagan (Urumi Melam) and Tharmendran (Urumi Melam), musicians, interviewed at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur.

The musicians themselves decide what music they are to play at Thaipusam. Musicians from the *isai vellalar* caste playing for *Brahmin* devotees have a choice of around fifteen pieces, such as *Bajana-Manasa Cheydu* (Offer Your Heart), *Ramanakku* (Song For Lord Rama), and the most popular piece for *Brahmins* at Thaipusam, *Manmadanukku* (For The Handsome One).<sup>27</sup> The sequence of pieces is also up to the musicians. Musicians from the *Kshatriya* caste have a wider selection of pieces. These include *Ammah Tahyeh* (Mother), *Adipadhathu* (Drums for the Lords), and *Munthi Munthi* (Song for Lord Ganesh), a very popular song for the *Kshatriya* caste.<sup>28</sup> A more extensive list of Thaipusam devotional pieces can be found in Appendix I. All the examples of musical pieces played at Thaipusam have been popular at the festival since it began, as these are traditional Hindu devotional pieces.

Since the 1990s, musicians, especially of the *Shudra* and *Dalit* castes, would sometimes attempt to add in popular Tamil cinema songs. However, this is generally thought to be inappropriate for Thaipusam by Hindu priests, members of the public, *kavadi* bearers and their friends and family, and the Malaysian Indian Congress (the political representation of the Malaysian Indian community). This is because cinema songs are mostly about worldly subjects such as physical relationships, drinking, or fighting, and the music at Thaipusam is supposed to be a form of religious devotion. There is very little improvisation, it is only noticeable in the caste where singing is used – that of the *Kshatriya* caste.

In 2006, musicians were banned from playing music all the way up to the hill top temple in the Batu Cave. They were required to cease playing at the bottom of the stairs leading to the temple, and could only ascend without their instruments. The

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<sup>27</sup> T. E. Palaniswamy, producer, *Mangalavathyam Napaswaram*, Kuala Lumpur: Alai Osai, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> M. Gunasegaran, producer, *Mahamuni Urumi Melam*, Kuala Lumpur: Ramiy Records, 2002.

musicians were deemed to be a “public nuisance” by the Malaysian Hindu Sangam, Malaysia’s biggest Hindu society run by M.I.C - the Malaysian Indian Congress. They were thought to be a nuisance as some brought instruments which were not classical Hindu instruments into the Batu Cave. These instruments included African bongo drums, police whistles, and tambourines. Some even brought stereos for playing popular Indian songs from movies. The musicians also took up a lot of space and prevented members of the public from moving around freely in the Batu Cave. Many musicians at Thaipusam disagree strongly with being called a public nuisance.<sup>29</sup>

The absence of music during this period can affect the trance state. The trance of the *kavadi* bearer does not seem as intense when traveling up the stairs to the Batu Cave without the music – they are less aggressive and active in their dancing. If musicians were banned completely from Thaipusam, many people believe the festival would not continue. A *Brahmin* Hindu priest at the 2006 Thaipusam festival claimed “music will always be a part of this festival. Lord Muruga was a very musical God.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Raveem, Sanggu, musician, interviewed at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>30</sup> Maanmuthi Iyer, Brahmin Hindu priest, interviewed at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur.

## 4.2 Trance induction

Chart showing the state of trance in relation of caste *kavadi* music.

| Castes                                 | Low state of trance   | Medium state of trance  | Highest state of trance  | Volume, tempo and beats per minute   | Repetition of rhythmic pattern                               |
|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| <i>Brahmins</i>                        | Devotee appears calm with closed eyes and no vigorous body movements.         | Devotees still have closed eyes and minor movements of their shoulders. | Devotees have their eyes open wide, moving shoulders and swaying of the body.              | Tempo is generally slow with a change to medium tempo and back. 175-150-170 bpm. | Not in the entire piece but towards the end.                 |
| <i>Kshatriyas</i>                      | Devotees have their eyes open and minor side-to-side movements of their head. | Minor progression into movements of the upper body.                     | Eyes wide open, body swaying with the pace of the music.                                   | Moderately loud and medium tempo throughout the song. 140 bpm.                   | Repetition of the pattern throughout the whole song.         |
| <i>Vaishyas</i>                        | Devotees have open eyes and minor head and body movements-light swaying.      | Sudden progression to heavy head movements and body swaying.            | Progression continues and addition of occasional foot stamping and out-bursts of screams.  | Louder than the above castes and a medium tempo of 140 bpm throughout.           | Repetition of the pattern throughout whole piece.            |
| <i>Shudras</i><br>and<br><i>Dalits</i> | Devotees have wide open eyes and heavy body swaying.                          | Progression to occasional foot stamping and sudden bursts of screams.   | Progression to occasional teeth grinding, staring onto the crowd and poking out of tongue. | Loud and continuous 140 bpm.   | Repetition of the same pattern throughout the whole session. |

Table 1 – Chart showing the state of trance in relation of caste *kavadi* music



Devotees who carry *kavadi* do so in a higher state of mind which is known as trance. The key elements for trance induction during the *kavadi* ritual are belief in the Hindu faith, preparatory fasting, the smell of burning incense together with the many sights (bright colours, many items and rituals religious significance etc) and sounds going on around them, the sound of the crowd chanting “*Vel! Vel! Vetri Vel!*” – “Lance! Lance! Victorious lance!” and singing, and, most importantly, the presence of music, especially rhythmic drumming.<sup>31</sup> “I have felt it’s [sic] power [of the drumming] personally in most Hindu temples during *puja* (worship) and especially during very serious large public rituals like the Thaipusam. In the *kavadi* ritual, these drum beats call living archetypes into the devotees and witnesses. I have felt this intoxication (trance). It is very real and affects devotees who hear it.”<sup>32</sup>

A devotee offering a *kavadi* for the first time at Thaipusam may see a guru for a period of one to two weeks before the festival in order to take trance training sessions. This prepares the devotees for the events of the day of the festival and gives them access to the guidance of a guru, who would have undergone trance induction many times himself. The trance induction training takes place in the evenings at a Hindu temple. People gather there to meditate, pray and seek advice from the guru. There is music, chanting, singing and dancing, but no piercing of the body as would take place during the *kavadi* ritual.<sup>33</sup>

A Hindu priest of the same caste as the devotee carries out the trance induction at Thaipusam. The trance induction begins with a *puja*, a blessing and prayer ceremony, which takes place by the Batu River, during which every single part

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<sup>31</sup> Ronald C Simons, Frank R Ervin, and Raymond H Prince, “The Psychobiology Of Trance” *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review* 25, New York, 1988, p. 306-331.

<sup>32</sup> Musafar Fakir (Thaipusam participant), e-mail interview, 23 February 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Ronald C Simons, p.251 – 252.

of the *kavadi* and the devotees are blessed before the procession. The *puja* consists of an offering of fruit, incense, or burning *karpooram* (a white, waxy solid with a pungent aroma, made from the wood of the camphor laurel), to the particular god for whom the devotee is carrying the *kavadi*. In recent years this way of doing *puja* has become standard for all castes. Previously, only devotees of the *Brahmin* caste made this sort of offering, while devotees from other castes also made animal sacrifices of chickens or goats for the gods for whom they were carrying *kavadi*.

After the *puja*, the trance induction begins while the musicians play. The trance inductor conducts prayers and calls for the chosen god of the devotee to come and let their spirit enter the devotee, to guide them through the journey to the Batu Cave. During the trance induction there is also the chanting of “*Vel! Vel!*” (“Lance! Lance!”), and the burning of incense by people in the crowd. After the trance induction, the procession can then begin. In some cases the *puja* and trance induction have to be repeated if it does not work the first time. Reasons for the induction not working can include the devotee not being properly prepared, lack of concentration during the ceremony, or if it is the devotee’s first time carrying the *kavadi*.

The music played by the Batu River during trance induction is the same as that which is played in procession up to the beginning of the stairs to the temple in the Batu Cave. At Thaipusam, the music is vastly different from music played at other Hindu festivals. There is more emphasis on drumming, the music is more energetic and invigorating, and the drumming rhythms are based on the beat of the heart.<sup>34</sup> Through a mixture of the drumming and other instruments, the mind and spirit of the devotee is prepared to undertake the demanding ritual requirements. Gilbert Rouget briefly underlines the importance of music for trance induction in his work *Music*

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<sup>34</sup> Musafar Fakir (Thaipusam participant), e-mail interview, 23 February 2005.

*And Trance*’ – “As a general rule, possession fit or trance is accompanied by music, and music is almost always regarded as being more or less responsible for its onset.”<sup>35</sup> The most important aspects of the music at Thaipusam for trance induction are the hypnotic facets of rhythm, the repetition of melody, the increase of tempo and the shortening of the beat pattern. Author Andrew Willford notes the importance of these musical features for trance induction - “As musicians played hypnotic and resonant hand-drums, devotees swayed and began to fall into trance. After a few heavy breaths, they stuck their tongues out and danced in a frenetic, yet stylized manner.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, music, with or without melody, is a key feature of trance induction.

There is evidence in other cultures of music being an important factor for trance induction. Johannes Wilbert, a professor of anthropology, has studied trance in the culture of the South American Indians. He found that trance was induced with the aid of tobacco and a rattle, from which a rhythm was produced of about sixty beats per minute – approximating a relaxed heartbeat. Hearing this rhythm, together with the inhalation of tobacco smoke, brings the person into a very calm and placid trance state - “This is just effective enough to produce a euphoric, relaxing feeling, at which time the sixty-beat rhythm begins to induce this slow breathing in the patient.”<sup>37</sup> The people involved in this ceremony believe that they are in communion with spirits and their gods when in this trance state.<sup>38</sup> This is similar to what is seen at Thaipusam,

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<sup>35</sup> Gilbert Rouget, *Music And Trance*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Willford, *Possession And Displacement In Kuala Lumpur's Ethnic Landscape* UNESCO, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> James Porter “Trance, Music, and Music/Trance Relations: A Symposium”, *Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology* 4, 1987, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

where incense smoke, rhythmic drumming, and particular religious beliefs are all important factors for trance induction.

Music with an emphasis on drumming, however important, is not the only factor needed for trance induction. Over-stimulation of the senses is a well established method of inducing trance. The subject also requires the right mind-set and expectations for what is going to happen in the trance induction. At Thaipusam, this comes from their cultural background and religious beliefs. During the trance induction ceremony, the subject's senses are assaulted with a number of things all at once. The overpowering smell of the incense, the chanting of the crowd (*'Vel!, Vel!'*), the sight of the statues of the gods, offerings and the holy colours which people wear – red, orange and yellow, and the drumming and music. All these factors combine to alter the person's consciousness, bringing them into a state of trance - "When all of these other powerful stimuli are operating together . . . music with its driving force can lower the threshold of consciousness"<sup>39</sup>

Author and lecturer Colleen Ward also emphasizes the importance of sensory bombardment, and especially repetitive auditory stimulation, for bringing a person into a state of trance. Trance induction in Thaipusam practices is primarily achieved through sensory bombardment and is assisted by certain ritual preparation and purification rites. Vocal and instrumental music, chanting, and percussion engage right hemispheric functioning, and other repetitive stimulation such as incense inhalation and stroking further contribute to trance induction. Fasting mediates dissociation, increasing the tendency toward hypoglycemia, and hyperventilation

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

augments the likelihood of trance.<sup>40</sup> Friends and family members attending the devotee may touch and stroke the devotee's arms, shoulders, face and other areas of exposed skin. This is yet another way of over-stimulating the devotee's senses when undertaking trance induction.

The nature of trance is different between castes - it is more intense or wild in the lower castes, where the music consists mainly of drumming, with no melodic musical instruments. In the lower castes the movements of the body are more vigorous, and sustained for a longer period of time. Through observations made at Malaysian Thaipusam festivals, it is made clear that the more repetitive the rhythm is, the deeper the state of trance attained. Clearly, the difference in music from one caste to another plays a major role in the intensity of the trance behaviors of the devotees. The *Vaishya Shudra* and *Dalit* castes have the most emphasis on drumming, and devotees from these castes display the wildest and deepest form of trance.

At the 2006 Thaipusam festival, it was observed that devotees from all castes came out of their high state of trance into a minor state of trance at the point where there was a change from live music to recorded music played over the loud-speakers. In the lower state of trance, the devotees did not show signs of a heavy trance state - the facial and body movements changed to those described in the chart as being of the minor trance state. This occurred at the base of the stairs leading to the cave temple, where the musicians were banned from ascending with their instruments. As the recorded music replaces musicians in the role of keeping devotees in the highest state of trance, the power of trance induction is diminished.

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<sup>40</sup> Colleen Ward, "Thaipusam In Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis Of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession And Self-Mortification Practices" *Ethos* 12:4, Society For Psychological Anthropology, 1984, p. 327.

The experience of being in the highest state of trance – known as '*arul*', is briefly described by an Australian *kavadi*-bearer, Carl Belle - "As you know, the trance which is desired is the *arul* trance state, not lower states. The experience of *arul* can be life changing, it can induce bliss which completely reorients the senses, and sends the individual on another and higher path."<sup>41</sup>

The banning of live musicians from proceeding up the main steps to the temple has taken away a significant aspect from the traditional essence and structure of the Thaipusam festival. In the future, if musicians are ever banned completely, and recorded music takes its place, the festival would have calmer devotees who do not display the more vigorous physical aspects normally seen in the *kavadi* procession, such as wild dancing and almost constant physical movement while carrying the *kavadi*. Being in a deep state of trance enables the devotee to have a remarkable capacity for physical endurance. Without the live music, the trance would not be induced to the fullest level possible. The devotees would quickly become tired and may not be able to carry out their *kavadi* offerings as they intended.

The Hindu belief system is a very important underlying factor in the trance induction ceremony at Thaipusam. It is difficult to determine to what extent music is responsible for the induction of trance when there is such a strong belief system present. Devotion to the Hindu gods gives the *kavadi* bearer an essential purpose and focus for the ritual. It is believed, and it is evident, that without Hindu belief a person cannot have the right expectations and mind-set for trance induction at Thaipusam, thus making Hindu belief the core of the ceremony of trance induction, at this festival.

People who attend the Thaipusam festival to fulfill a vow consist of religious Hindu devotees who are there to offer their *kavadi* to the gods. They hold strong

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<sup>41</sup> Carl Belle (Thaipusam devotee), email interview, 30 December 2002.

Hindu beliefs, and believe in the spiritual nature of the trance induction. The remainder of the people attending are mostly musicians, family members of the devotees (who are there to provide support), Hindu priests, trance inductors, stall vendors, Hindu volunteers (those who hand out food and drinks provided by the Hindu Sangam), Malaysian Hindu Sangam members, Hindus from foreign countries who come to Malaysia for the festival, and members of the Malaysian Indian Congress – the members of which are all Hindus, including leader Dato Samy Vellu. The factors involved in the trance induction at Thaipusam can affect more people than just the *kavadi* bearer for which they are intended. People attending the devotee for whom the trance induction ceremony is being carried out can also come into a state of trance. This is because the majority of onlookers are from a Hindu background, as described above, and would be receptive to the ideas behind the *kavadi* ritual. Many would have undergone some preparation prior to the festival, such as fasting and abstaining from sex, much like those intending to bear a *kavadi*, and they, also, are subject to the smell of incense, the visual factors, and the sounds of the drumming present when at the festival. The author observed a Hindu onlooker falling into trance state at the 2003 Thaipusam festival. A Hindu woman came under trance while attending another woman for whom the trance induction ceremony was being conducted. The second woman then also undertook the journey to the Batu Cave temple.

Evidence that it is necessary for a person to have a strong Hindu belief in order to attain a trance state at the Thaipusam festival can be found in the following examples. In the crowds at the festival there are also non-Hindu Malay spectators and officials from government organizations such as the police, army, fire-brigade, red cross and television crew present - many of them being Muslims, who do not fall into

a sudden trance state as they are watching the trance inductions and processions. A Muslim at the Thaipusam festival will not fall into trance state, because in Islam it is prohibited to believe in any god other than Allah. Muslim spectators would not have the right mind-set to allow them to fall into trance at a festival devoted to a Hindu god. Islam also sees possession in the Hindu religion as something akin to Satanism, especially when self mortification is involved. Even if Muslim spectators would fall into trance, they could be charged under the Islamic *Shyria* law and be labeled as a *murtart* (a failure in the Islamic religion). There has been no known incident of a Muslim person entering a trance state at the Malaysian Thaipusam festival.

However, a number of Chinese spectators have been seen to come into a trance state, as they are generally more accepting of the religious beliefs behind the festival. These Chinese spectators are mostly Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist and have a greater understanding of the principles of religious trance compared to Malay Muslims. These Chinese spectators are more accepting of the idea of the trance state due to the similarities to Hinduism in the Buddhist and Taoist religions – both of which accept that trance is a “touched by the gods” situation. Attending Thaipusam can be a way to express their beliefs. The remainder of the spectators are from Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, and are most likely to be from an atheist or Christian background, with a very few Hindus.

Music, with or without melody, is a key feature of trance induction. “Music might not directly induce trance, but it is recognized as key among the cluster of elements that contribute to inducing trance. For the most part, music works a neurological effect on the listener. Cultural associations that accompany the music also play an important role in stimulating a trance experience.”<sup>42</sup> In some instances

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<sup>42</sup> David Aldridge and Jörg Fachner ed. *Music And Trance*, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006, p. 49 – 50.



there have been spectators at Thaipusam who come into the trance state only with the live music - mostly drumming without the melodic instruments typical of the *Brahmin* caste, chanting, and a strong religious belief with acceptance of their “touched-by the gods” situation. In these cases, the trance state was achieved without prior preparation for the festival, without the aid of prayers specifically for them by a trance inductor, and without the overpowering smell of incense. This adds weight to the premise that, of all the factors used to aid trance induction, live rhythmic music – especially drumming - and religious belief are the most important.

The drummers, then, are the most important people involved for inducing trance at the Thaipusam festivals. They are more important than the trance inductor. There have been many instances where a trance-seeking devotee from the *Brahmin* caste (where melodic instruments such as the *nadaswaram* typically used by this caste are not present) fell into a trance state. It can be argued then, that the rhythmic beat of the drums is clearly the most important aspect of the music at Thaipusam for inducing trance. The power of drumming in trance induction has been a key factor in other cultures - for example, as stated in Gilbert Rouget’s work ‘*Music And Trance*’ - “In Haiti, the tambourier (drummer) may not be a professional musician, often is not even an initiate, but he nevertheless is the mainspring of the entire voodoo ceremony... a talented drummer can induce possessions or halt them as he wishes.”<sup>43</sup> Rouget claims that a devotee submits himself to the musicians, and they, in a sense, hold the devotee in their power, leading them into the trance state by adjusting the intensity and speed of their drumming.<sup>44</sup> Carl Belle, a western *kavadi*-bearer, states clearly the importance of music, especially the rhythmic drumming, for his trance experience at

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<sup>43</sup> Rouget, p.112.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

the 2003 Thaipusam festival - “There is no doubt at all that drumming and *nadasuaram*, together with songs of *kavadi* repertoire help induce *arul* (trance state).<sup>45</sup>

Drumming rhythms with a high number of beats per minute are the most effective for inducing trance - “Shaking a rattle (or beating a drum) approximately 220 times a minute for a 15-minute period provides the optimal sensory stimulus to the nervous system for inducing a trance”.<sup>46</sup> The music at Thaipusam is not as rapid as this as it mostly remains in the region of one hundred and forty to one hundred and seventy five beats per minute; however, this is still very fast.

It is clear that changes in the frequency of the beat, breaks in the rhythm and an increase in volume are the features of the rhythmic drumming at Thaipusam which bring a devotee into trance. Ronald C Simons attended a trance training session in preparation for the 1984 Thaipusam festival. He states,

“Because trouble cases are especially revealing, we paid special attention to these persons and to the techniques the guru and the group used to assist them. At times the guru would pull them forwards and backwards, apparently attempting to push them over some threshold into trance by getting them moving. Auditory intensification was another technique frequently used. Large numbers of devotees and a cluster of drummers would gather around a difficult case, singing, clapping, and drumming, increasing the volume of the sound and the frequency of the beat. Sometimes they sang alternately into his or her right and left ear. The waxing and waning of the intensity and rhythm sometimes proceeded uninterruptedly for half to three-quarters of an hour. The group behaved as if its members believed that by this means an individual could be pushed over some boundary into trance.”<sup>47</sup>

Gilbert Rouget comes to a similar conclusion - “Although there are not enough data at our disposal to enable us to state that such rhythmic breaks constitute

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<sup>45</sup> Carl Belle (Thaipusam devotee), email interview, 30 December 2002.

<sup>46</sup> Aldridge and Fachner, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Simons, Ervin, and Prince, p. 258.

one of the universal features of possession music, it is nevertheless true that they recur very frequently, and this is something to remember. On the contrary, it does seem that we can consider another rhythmic feature, the acceleration of tempo to be universally used as a means of triggering trance”<sup>48</sup> He also states that the acceleration of tempo in trance-inducing music very often comes with an intensification of sound.<sup>49</sup>

A similar finding appears in *‘Music And Trance’*, edited by David Aldridge and Jörg Fachner – that to aid in trance induction, music must ideally be rhythmic and repetitive, but must also have features which prevent it from sounding merely like a boring loop. “Music that best assists in inducing trance has regular pulsation and repetitive tonal patterns based on a restricted number of pitch levels. At the same time, it must not sink to musical boredom.”<sup>50</sup> The music of all the castes at Thaipusam fit this description as they all feature regular drumming rhythms, while also having features which break the monotony. These features range from changes in time signature and drumming patterns, melody from *nadaswaram* or the voice, or soundings from the *kombu*, or *sanggu*. The music of each caste is discussed in depth in chapter six.

A devotee of one caste could, theoretically, come into a trance state while listening to music played by musicians of another caste at the Thaipusam festival. This is because the music of all the castes have similar features which help induce trance, such as a frequent number of beats per minute, repetitive rhythms, and changes in volume (as discussed above). However, it is probable that this would not occur. This is because the separation of the different castes is clearly defined in

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<sup>48</sup> Rouget, p. 81.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>50</sup> Aldridge and Fachner, p. 47.

traditional Hindu culture, and to cross over these boundaries is still considered by some to be unacceptable in religious contexts. Therefore, a person listening to music being played especially for a devotee of another caste would not have the right mindset to accept a trance state from that music. However, a member of any caste could quite possibly come into trance when listening to the music played by a ‘super group’ of mixed caste musicians. This is because they use different aspects of the music of all the castes (this is discussed further in chapter seven).

Drumming not only helps to induce the devotee into a trance state, but also helps to keep them in that state. At the 1984 Thaipusam festival, Ronald C Simons interviewed a number of participants who underwent piercing as part of their *kavadi*. There was a waiting period after the devotees had been pierced, during which others went through the piercing process. “Some told us that if they began to be aware of their surroundings and of pain during this waiting period they could diminish awareness by moving closer to the drummers and singers. Others described similar experiences and a similar strategy during the procession to the caves. Devotees reported islands of recollection and awareness of pain which would then be obliterated by the drumming and singing of those attendant on them.”<sup>51</sup> This demonstrates that the repetitive rhythms of the drumming and chanting alone could pull the participants back from a lighter state of trance into a deeper state of trance.

The devotees come out of their trance when they reach the temple in the Batu Cave. Hindu priests (the trance inductor) receive the devotees and pray to the chosen god to end the trance state. If piercings were involved they are removed and the puncture marks rubbed with *vibuthi* (holy ash). Hundreds of devotees queue to see a senior priest of the Batu Cave hill top temple to offer the *kavadi* which they have

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<sup>51</sup> Simons, Ervin, and Prince, p. 263.

brought for Lord Muruga or their chosen god. Milk is poured on the statue of Lord Muruga and fruit is squeezed over it in order to bathe the statue.

## 5. Musical instruments at the Thaipusam festival

### 5.1 Membranophones

David Reck defines membranophones as “. . . instruments whose sound source is a vibrating skin or membrane. All drums are membranophones (except log “drums” and Burmese metal Shan “drums” which are idiophones since neither has a skin), but not all membranophones are drums, since stretched skins can be made to sound not only by striking them with hands or sticks but by friction and air as well”<sup>52</sup>

Drums have long been one of the most important instruments in Indian music, and have been highly esteemed in Indian culture since ancient times. Drummers required a high standard of education, were paid well, and considered to be great artists.<sup>53</sup> Drums can be found at all Hindu festivals, religious ceremonies, and ceremonies marking important events in human life such as birth, marriage, and death. There are a number of different membranophones used at the Thaipusam festival.

Gilbert Rouget claims that drums are the most frequently used instrument in possession music – “In short, if the drum is the instrument most often used for possession music, this is because it can be melodic as well as rhythmic, and because, when fulfilling the second of these functions, it can be incorporated into a great many

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<sup>52</sup> David Reck *Music of the Whole Earth*, New York: Scribner, 1977, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Herbert A Popley *The Music Of India*, Delhi, India: Indological Book House, 1986, p. 78 – 80.

different instrumental ensembles.”<sup>54</sup> The drumming at Thaipusam is important for inducing and sustaining trance, and, as the heart of the musical group, keeping the other players in time. C. R. Day explains the importance of drumming in Hindu music - “Percussion is the life and soul of a performance. It keeps time for the soloist, it underlines the melody, it makes the phrasing clearer. In short, it sets the melody in its correct perspective and provides a framework for it. It is only natural that for this we need very subtle expressive instruments and, of course, nimble fingers to play them. The accompanist on the percussion has also to be a fine musician who understands all the traditions of our music – all of its science and most of its art.”<sup>55</sup>

The drums used at the Thaipusam festival are the *tavil*, the *urumi melam*, and the *tappu* (used only by the two lowest castes, the *Sudras* and *Dalits*).

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<sup>54</sup> Rouget, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> C R Day, *The Music and Musical Instruments Of Southern India And The Deccan*, Delhi: B R Publishing, 1985, p. 15.

### 5.1.1 *Tavil*



Figure 3 - front view of a *tavil* used in the Thaipusam festival.<sup>56</sup>

One of the commonly used drums in the Thaipusam festival is the *tavil* (*tavul* or *davul*). It is a double-headed, barrel-shaped membranophone which is hollowed out of a solid block of heavy jack wood or black wood. On both sides of the barrel are hempen hoops fastened by interwoven leather straps. Also attached to the hoops are two very thick goat skins stretched to form the two heads. The drum is eighteen

<sup>56</sup> Picture taken by Mohan, Palaniappan of a *tavil* at the 2007 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

inches tall, with a bass head of around ten inches and a treble head of around eight inches in diameter. The pitch is adjusted by tightening the skin with the help of a leather band, which passes round the middle of the barrel and over the braces.

The right drum membrane (the treble) is played with the fingers of the right hand, each of which is capped with a hardened rice-paste thimble. Rings made of the same material as the caps are also worn on the knuckles of the right hand. The treble drum-head is stretched tight but is not tuned to any particular pitch. Different styles and patterns in the rhythm, are produced by using different finger combinations. For example, *Brahmins* use the five fingers in precise sequences according to the song they are playing. For other castes, the finger combinations are decided by the players themselves.

The left drum membrane (the bass) is played with a thick, straight stick called a *kucchi*, which is made out of bamboo or *purasai* (wood from the Portia tree) – this stick is used by the *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* castes. Sometimes a hard plastic stick (balloon stick) is used by the lower castes. The use of these sticks gives the left membrane its characteristic, dull, bass sound. For all castes, the hitting style is basically the same – a simple strike with the *kucchi*. However, musicians of the *Vaishya* caste sometimes only use the bass side of the *tavil*, using both hands to strike it with plastic sticks. The beat is determined by the song they are playing. If the player is sitting (as in a temple), the player lays the *tavil* flat on the floor, between the knees and ankles, and plays both ends of the drum. In the case of the Thaipusam procession, he plays it while he stands. Then the *tavil* is hung around the neck of the player by a strap, thus allowing both hands to be free to play.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Reis Flora and Alastair Dick, “Nagasvaram”, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Sadie Stanley, London : Macmillan, 2001, 17, p. 529.



### 5.1.2 *Urumi melam*



Figures 4 and 5 - two views of an *urumi melam* being played at the Thaipusam festival.<sup>58</sup>

The *urumi melam* is a double headed wooden drum, with an hour-glass shape. It is usually made of heavy jack wood, with cow hide stretched over a metal ring on each end – sometimes lizard skin can be used on the right-hand end. The skins are kept taut by a length of rope which is wound around the drum, back and forth between the skins.<sup>59</sup> Around each head, on the side, are a series of seven to eight holes through which the length of rope is passed. The pitch of the drum is altered by adjusting the tightness of the rope, and thus the tautness of the skins.

<sup>58</sup> Picture taken by the author of two *urumi melam* being played in the 2005 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

<sup>59</sup> David Reck, ed. Alison Arnold, "Musical Instruments: Southern Area" *Garland Encyclopedia of Music. South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, New York: Garland, 2000, p. 84.

The *urumi melam* is hung around the neck so that it is horizontal, this enables it to be played when walking, sitting down, or even when dancing. At Thaipusam it is played with sticks of rattan or hard plastic. Simple, short strikes produce a typical hollow sound. If the drum is struck on the right-hand end while at the same time a long stick is drawn across the left-hand end, a drawn-out bass tone is produced. Either castor oil or wood ash is applied in a wide strip across the diameter of the left-hand head to help it produce this sound. When this particular tone is heard repeatedly in the Thaipusam music, the effect is quite hypnotic.

It is traditionally believed that the *urumi melam* was used by the god Siva. In modern times it is more often used by, for example, beggars and snake-charmers – people of the lower castes.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Popley, p. 122.

### 5.1.3 *Tappu*



Figures 6 and 7 - front and back views of a *tappu* drum, which is used in the Thaipusam festival.<sup>61</sup>

The *tappu*, also known as a *parai* drum, is an instrument used by the two lowest castes, the *Shudras* and *Dalits*. It is a membranophone made of a circular wooden frame (made of *neem* wood, although other wood may be used) approximately thirty-five centimeters in diameter with cow-hide stretched over and bound with wood glue onto one end. The other end is left open. The frame is constructed of three separated curved pieces of wood, joined by three metal plates. It is played with two sticks, one short straight stick and one long curved stick, both made out of *echa* wood. The short, straight stick measures approximately eighteen centimeters, and the other long and thin stick is approximately twenty-eight centimeters.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Picture taken from [www.indianmusic.com](http://www.indianmusic.com). Image downloaded on 27/07/2004.

<sup>62</sup> Reck and Arnold, p. 84.

It is hung over the left shoulder and held on the left side of the body. It too can be played while walking, sitting, or even dancing at the Thaipusam festival. In some cases at Thaipusam, the *tappu* is held by one person while another strikes it with two rattan or plastic sticks. The cow hide is tightened before playing by holding the instrument close to an open fire. This causes it to produce a louder, cracking sound when struck.

In recent years, this instrument has become less popular with the two lowest castes, as to use it in public identifies the players as being low in society. This can be seen at large scale events such as Thaipusam, where many people from all castes assemble together, and those of the lowest may be ashamed at being marked out as such. Instead, musicians may adopt drums traditionally used by higher castes.

## 5.2 Aerophones

Jeremy Montagu defines aerophones as “. . . instruments which make sound as air vibrates through a tube. The vibration starts with either lip vibration as with a trumpet, a reed as with clarinets, saxophones and organs, a ball as with a whistle, or by air, striking a sharp edge as in a flute. The shape of the sound wave is determined by the width and length of the tube through which the air travels. The longer the tube is, the longer the sound wave is, which means the deeper the sound.”<sup>63</sup> Wind instruments are very important in Indian music, but take a secondary role to stringed instruments. This is because in ancient times members of the *Brahmin* caste were not permitted to use wind instruments, they were played only by people of lower castes. In ancient times it was found that stringed instruments were too weak for playing in

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<sup>63</sup> Jeremy Montagu, “Distinctions Among The Aerophones”, *The Galpin Society Journal*, Volume 24, United Kingdom: The Galpin Society, July 1971, p. 106 – 108.

the open air, and so for this purpose wind instruments came into being at an early date.<sup>64</sup> All manner of wind instruments are used in Hindu religious rituals, marriage, funerals, childbirth, and processions. In South India and Malaysia, the *nadaswaram* is the most important wind instrument,<sup>65</sup> with the *kombu* and *sanggu* also featuring prominently. All three are used in the Malaysian Thaipusam festival.

### 5.2.1 Nadaswaram



Figure 8 - *Nadaswaram*<sup>66</sup>

*Nadaswaram*, also known as *nagaswaram*, *nagasara*, or *nagasuram*, is a large double reed shawm or oboe used by the *isai vallalar Brahmins* on Hindu religious occasions, festivals and processions, as well as for classical music. It is around two to two and a half feet in length. It is conical in shape, gradually enlarging towards the lower end. It is usually made of a dark, close-grained wood called *chandanna*, but

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<sup>64</sup> Popley, p. 115.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>66</sup> Picture taken by Mohan Palaniappan of a *nadaswaram* in Malaysia, 2007.

may also be made of metal.<sup>67</sup> The top portion has a metal staple (called *mel anaichu*) into which is inserted a small metallic cylinder (called *kendai*) which carries the mouthpiece, made of reed and called a *sevali*. Besides spare reeds, a small ivory or horn needle is attached to the *nadaswaram*. This needle is used to clear the mouthpiece of saliva particles and allows the free passage of air.

The *nadaswaram* has twelve holes in total, seven of which are used in fingering – three for the upper hand and four for the lower. Either hand may be the top hand. The remaining five holes are located on the lower part of the instrument and, depending on the player's preference, are filled with bee wax to permanently block them which regulates the pitch.<sup>68</sup> The *nadaswaram* has a range of two and a half octaves, like the flute. The system of fingering is also similar to that of the flute. But, unlike the flute, where semi and quarter tones are produced by the partial opening and closing of the finger holes, in the *nadaswaram* they are produced by adjusting the pressure and strength of the air-flow into the pipe. F is the lowest pitch on a *nadaswaram*. The player usually sits down to play the *nadaswaram* if in a temple, but at the Thaipusam ceremony plays it while standing.<sup>69</sup>

Due to its intense volume and strength the *nadaswaram* is used as an outdoor instrument and much more suited for open spaces than for closed, indoor, concert situations. The *nadaswaram* is often accompanied by other instruments, such as the *ottu* (a reed drone which looks similar to a *nadaswaram*) and the *tavil*. However, at the Thaipusam festival the *ottu* is never used because the festival centers on a

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<sup>67</sup> Day, p. 147.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>69</sup> W Subramanian and Viji Subramanian, *Euphony: Indian Classical Music*, Madras: East West Books, 1995, p. 98-99.

religious procession - it is not a close social gathering where the *ottu* would normally played.

### 5.2.2 *Kombu*



Figure 9 - an 'S' shaped *kombu* being played during a trance induction ceremony at a Thaipusam festival.<sup>70</sup>

The *kombu* ('horn' in Tamil) is a large, curved brass horn. This is the oldest Indian wind instrument, and in ancient times was made from buffalo horn. The same instrument is known as a *narsinga* in Nepal. It is from four to six feet in length, and, for practical reasons, is made from four brass or finely beaten copper pieces which can be fitted into each other.<sup>71</sup> If the pieces are fitted together in a 'C' shape, a metal rod can often be seen connecting the mouthpiece end to the wider, flared end. The

<sup>70</sup> Picture taken by the author of a musician playing a *kombu* in the 2007 Thaipusam in Malaysia.

<sup>71</sup> Popley, p. 115 – 116.



instrument flares from a small mouthpiece with a circumference of 4.8 centimeters to a circumference of 26.7 centimeters at the bell.<sup>72</sup> A modern trend has emerged to fit the four metal pieces of the instrument together into an ‘S’ shaped curve instead of the traditional rounded ‘C’ shaped instrument. Both shapes have been seen at recent Malaysian Thaipusam festivals. The metal sections can be ‘telescoped’ together to make storage and transportation easier.<sup>73</sup>

The *kombu* was traditionally used in India for sounding signals, and by watchmen on their rounds. It is an instrument which is traditionally important for funerals of Hindus from all castes, from princes to *Dalits*, though it is most often played by members of the *Vaishya* caste.

The *kombu* does not produce a melody, rather, rich tones which can vary from being low to high and shrill in nature, depending on the embouchure used. Any position of the mouth may be used when playing. The Nepalese *narsinga* is tuned to an approximate *Eb*, with some instruments differing by a semitone. This is also the case at in Malaysia and the Thaipusam festival.<sup>74</sup> “It is quite possible to get a large number of notes from it and shrill wavering cadences. I have never heard a melody played upon it.”<sup>75</sup>

When being played, the instrument is supported at the first joint of the four sections by the left hand, and at the mouthpiece by the right hand. The right hand circles the mouthpiece to create a seal between the instrument and the mouth, in order

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<sup>72</sup> Carol Tingey, *Auspicious Music In A Changing Society, The Damāi Musicians Of Nepal*, London: School of Oriental And African Studies, University of London, 1994, p. 57.

<sup>73</sup> Tingey, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Tingey, p. 61.

<sup>75</sup> Popley, p. 116.



to prevent air escaping.<sup>76</sup> At Thaipusam it is only played by members of the *Vaishya* caste. Sudden bursts are used sparingly during the procession, when the musician himself feels the music has reached a climax.

### 5.2.3 Sanggu



Figures 10 – 12 - young *sanggu* player blowing his instrument.<sup>77</sup>

The *sanggu*, or *sankhu*, is a conch shell used as a horn. Conch shells come in different sizes which produce different pitches – a higher pitch for a smaller shell and a lower pitch for a larger one. It is a sacred, ancient instrument, used in daily Hindu temple rituals. It believed to have been first used by the god Krishna, and it is mentioned in the epic of the *Ramayana*, where it is called the *Devadatta*. It is also called the *Gosringa*, in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.<sup>78</sup> It does not

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<sup>76</sup> Tingey, p. 62.

<sup>77</sup> Pictures taken by the author, of a young *sanggu* player in the 2006 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

<sup>78</sup> Popley, p. 101.

produce a melody, but is used to give an opening fanfare or a rhythmical accompaniment for martial or religious events.<sup>79</sup> The tone can be varied, depending on the positioning of the lips. It is usually played by members of the *Shudra* or *Dalit* caste. However, at the 2006 Thaipusam festival it was seen to be played by a member of the *Kshatriya* caste, as a member of a group of musicians of mixed caste. The role of the *sanggu* at Thaipusam is to accompany the processional music, and it is sounded sparingly, much like the *kombu*.

### 5.3 Idiophones

In Indian music, idiophones, or drone instruments, produce a harmonic or monophonic effect where a note is repeatedly sounded, or is continuously held throughout much or all of a piece. This produces a tonality upon which the rest of the piece can be built.<sup>80</sup> The most common drone instrument in Indian music is the *tambura* - a chordophone i.e., a stringed instrument. However, at Thaipusam, the most common instruments to fulfill the drone role are the *jalra* and *salangai*, both percussion instruments which maintain the beat instead. When a *urumi melam* musician at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Dinesh, was asked why the *tambura* was not used at the festival as a drone instrument, he responded that to do so was not practical when walking so far in the procession, it is not suitable for making music outdoors, it does not produce the desired rhythmical accompaniment which is better produced by percussion instruments, and finally, that it is not so much a part of the Tamil tradition at Thaipusam.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid* p.116.

<sup>80</sup> Bonnie C Wade, *Music In India – The Classical Traditions*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2001, p. 22 – 23.

<sup>81</sup> Dinesh (*Urumi Melam*), musician, interviewed at the 2006 Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur.

### 5.3.1 *Jalra*



Figure 13 - a close up picture of a *jalra* used in the Thaipusam festival.<sup>82</sup>

The *jalra* are a set of two small cymbals which can vary in size from five to seven centimeters in diameter. They are usually made of brass, though copper or bronze may also be used. They are connected with a leather or material cord which is passed through their centres. The outer surfaces can be left plain, but are more often decorated with symbols such as '*ohm*', a Hindu religious symbol, or swastikas for peace. Their main purpose is to keep the time in a piece.<sup>83</sup>

To play, one is held quite tightly in the left hand while the other, held loosely in the right-hand, is struck against the other. Different sounds can be produced

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<sup>82</sup> Picture taken by the author of a *jalra* player in the 2006 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

<sup>83</sup> Day, p. 143.

depending on how they are struck together. A shrill ringing tone is produced when the upper edge of one of the discs is struck against the lower edge of the other. A duller ringing tone is produced when thin outer rim is struck against the lip of the other, so that they are at right angles to each other. The ringing can be stopped short to give a syncopated effect when the player touches a middle finger to the discs. A short, hollow tone is produced when the discs are struck exactly together so that no reverberation occurs. When the discs are rubbed back and forth against each other a continuous 'hissing' ringing sound is produced. These different playing styles are brought in by the player when improvising; he chooses which style he wants depending on what he thinks suits the music at that point. Often, the *jalra* player uses these different styles to imitate the rhythms of the bass drum.

At the 2007 Thaipusam festival, a group of mixed caste musicians was seen to replace the *jalra* with a *chimta* - a traditional percussion instrument from North India. *Chimta* literally means 'a pair of tongs'. The *chimta* consists of a long folded steel strip, with seven to fourteen pairs of small metal discs attached to it along its length, each very similar to a tiny *jalra*. The metal strip is around a meter long and is folded at its middle to form a 'V' shape. On the arms of the 'V' are fixed the sets of small discs of brass. The instrument is shaken or beaten against the palm rhythmically in accompaniment to *bhajans*, folk songs and dances in North India.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> On *chimta*, [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), data downloaded 20/03/2007.



Figure 14 - *chimta* used in the 2006 Thaipusam festival by a mixed caste musicians group.<sup>85</sup>

### 5.3.2 *Salangai*



Figure 15 - a pair of *salangai*.<sup>86</sup>

In South India, this instrument is called *salangai*, and is often worn as an anklet. The *salangai* is a series of many bells attached to a leather strap, and is either worn on the ankles or held in the hands, and is shaken or struck to produce sound. The bells are usually made of brass and can be arranged on the leather strap in three to six

<sup>85</sup> Picture of a *chimta* downloaded from [www.indianinstruments.com](http://www.indianinstruments.com), 20/03/2007.

<sup>86</sup> Picture taken by the author of a *salangai* in the 2006 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

rows. When worn on the leg the bells must be made of brass or silver, as wearing gold on one's feet is taboo. This is because gold symbolizes the deity of wealth, Goddess *Lakshmi*, and it is a sign of disrespect to drape her on one's feet.

The legs are stamped to make the bells jingle, and when walking or dancing a rhythm is produced. The *salangai* can also be held in the hands and struck against a palm to produce sound, like a tambourine. These hand-held *salangai* are sometimes custom made, and can even feature gold-plated bells. It is worn as an anklet by Hindus of all castes as an adornment for dancing, from highly skilled *bharata-natyam* dancing to common folk-dancing, but for the purposes of making music it is used only by Hindus of the *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* castes.

## 5.4 Singing



Figure 16 - *Kshatriya* caste singer, with megaphone and small hand-held microphone at the Thaipusam festival.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Picture of a *Kshatriya* caste singer taken by the author in the 2006 Thaipusam festival in Malaysia.

Singing is considered to be an option open to virtually anybody in Hindu society. It is highly regarded as an art and used often in many religious and social events. “Every singer is a creative artist in the fullest sense of the word. In the West, a singer is a vehicle for the expression of other people’s (the composer’s) ideas and very often as in so many operas, a voice is used just like any other instrument. In Europe a young man decides to become a singer if he has a good voice; in India a young man decides to become a singer if he is musical.”<sup>88</sup> Singing is predominantly used at the Thaipusam festival by the *Kshatriya* caste. From observation at the Malaysian Thaipusam festivals, anyone of the *Kshatriya* caste in the crowd can join a group of *Kshatriya* musicians as a singer. Preparation is not considered to be too important, as long as the person knows the words to the song and has ability. At Thaipusam, a singer usually uses a megaphone to allow them to be heard.

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<sup>88</sup> Day, p. 10.

## 6. Different caste styles of music in the *kavadi* ritual

### 6.1 *Brahmin*

The *Brahmins* strictly follow the *Vedas*, sacred Hindu texts. The *Vedas* are separated into divisions called *Upavedas*, which are *Ayurveda* (medicine), *Dhanur Veda* (military science), *Sthapatya Veda* (architecture), and the *Gandharva Veda* (music and dance). *Brahmin* music has its origin in the *Gandharva Veda* - the *Veda* of celestial musicians and singers. Hindus believe the gods themselves played instruments - Shiva played *dhamaru* (drums), Krishna played *venu* (flute), and Saraswati, the goddess of learning, played the *veena* (lute). These are the classical *Brahmin* musical instruments. Music was considered to be of divine origin, and therefore, in ancient times, only those of the highest caste were permitted to acquire knowledge of it –

“Hence the ancient Brahmins of the country would have excommunicated any of their number who would have so far presumed as to betray the sacred writings to any but the elect, whose mouths only were esteemed sufficiently holy to utter words so sacred. Indeed, it was the knowledge of which they were possessed that was



the chief cause of the reverence and adoration paid to the Brahmins of old, and which gave them the power and influence they prized so much.”<sup>89</sup>

There are two systems of classical music, called *Carnatic* and *Hindustani*. The *Carnatic Sampradaya*, the musical system used by *Brahmins*, encompasses music written in Sanskrit and the South Indian language Tamil, and has a history dating back to the *Vedas*. The fundamental elements of *Carnatic* classical music are *ragam* and *talam*. *Ragam* (melody) is a musical concept developed by the *Brahmin* caste. It consists of a scale of notes, and a melody, which is the aural form, or the tune used to express these notes. The seven basic notes in Indian music are called the *Sapta svaras*. They are - *sa* (*Shadjam*), *ri* (*Rishabham*), *ga* (*Gaandhaaram*), *ma* (*Madhyamam*), *pa* (*Panchamam*), *dha* (*Dhaivatam*) and *ni* (*Nishaadham*). These seven notes are equivalent to the Western “do – re – mi – fa – so – la – ti” scale.<sup>90</sup>

The other fundamental element of *Brahmin* music is *talam*, the rhythm or the time-measure. *Talams* always occur in cyclic pattern. *Talam* thus involves both a quantitative element (time units or counts) and a qualitative element (accent or stress). The basic building blocks for *talam* are *angas*. Various combinations of these *angas* give rise to various *talams*.

According to Robert L. Hargrave Junior and Stephen M. Slawek, drums and most wind instruments are predominantly the instruments of Hindus from the lowest castes, and Muslims. The authors identify stringed instruments to be the instruments of *Brahmins*. The *Brahmins* avoid wind instruments as it is considered to be unclean to touch their mouths to instruments after they have been touched by saliva. *Brahmins* also avoid drums because they are not permitted to touch cow hide

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<sup>89</sup> Day, p. 5.

<sup>90</sup> Wade, p. 20-46.

as these animals are considered to be sacred.<sup>91</sup> Lily Strickland also writes about the restrictions for *Brahmins* in Hindu music and comments on their inconsistencies and irrationality. “No one knows just when these musical taboos came into being but some of them seem very inconsistent when one considers the divine origin of Hindu music. One would suppose that music and musical instruments, having been invented by Gods, would attain a sanctity which would extend to the musicians themselves. But there is no rational explanation for any taboo and inconsistencies abound in all religions.”<sup>92</sup>

The *Brahmin* caste is unique in that its musicians traditionally learn their craft in a *guru-shiysha* system, where the *shiysha* (student) lives with a *guru* (teacher) for a period of up to ten years, from the age of six. However, this practice is declining due to a modernization of Hindu society. The *Brahmin* caste music at Thaipusam does not strictly follow the above *ragam*, and *talam* structure, due to the decline of the *guru-shiysha*. There is some improvisation at the festival by the musicians playing for *Brahmin* caste devotees, due to an absence of sheet music.

The drum used by the *Brahmins* to induce trance is the *tavil*, the melodic wind-instrument used is the *nadaswaram*, and the *jalra* is also used.<sup>93</sup> The following piece, which was played at the 2005 Thaipusam ceremony, shows the use of these instruments and will be used to reveal the characteristics of *Brahmin* music. Of all the castes, the *Brahmins* have the most complex music at the Thaipusam festival, hence the more in depth analysis of the example from this caste. There are other pieces played prior to the actual *Brahmin kavadi* ritual. This occurs during the *puja* (a small

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<sup>91</sup> Robert L Hargrave Junior and Stephen M Slawek, “Instruments And Music Culture in Eighteenth Century India: The Solvyns Portraits”, *Asian Music*, 20, 1, Autumn, 1988, p. 4-5.

<sup>92</sup> Lily Strickland “The Mythological Background Of Hindu Music”, *The Musical Quarterly*. Volume 17 No. 3, July 1931, p. 336.

<sup>93</sup> Nalamah Ramasamy (Tamil school teacher), Kuala Lumpur, interviewed 2003.

prayer which takes place for around ten minutes) where the *Brahmin* caste musicians play more relaxed pieces called *tillana padalgal* ('peaceful songs'). It is during these pieces that the *nadaswaram* players get to show off their skills. In contrast, the drums take a dominant role in the actual *kavadi* ritual music.

### 6.1.1 *Manmadannukku* (For The Handsome One)

*Manmadannukku* (Tamil), "For The Handsome One", is the most frequently chosen piece played in the *Brahmin kavadi* ritual and is therefore representative of *Brahmin kavadi music*. This piece is played by two *nadaswaram* players, one *tavil* player and a *jalra* player, of the *isai vellalar Brahmin* caste. A high quality, studio recording of this piece was transcribed (appendix II) and used for analysis. This was because the details of the music are clearer on the studio recording and can be conveyed in the transcription. The music in the field recordings is the same but the soundscape often obscures musical features and sometimes players are not so skilled as those on the studio recordings. The transcriber's approach to the music immediately reveals some of its primary characteristics.

By listening to the piece several times, I divided it into sections. It seemed very repetitive, with only four main musical ideas; A, B, C and D, and two section. The recording quality was excellent, which proved to be great advantage for distinguishing the two melodic instruments, *nadaswaram* one and two. I did, however, have some difficulty discerning some of the *jalra's* open and closed strikes when all of the other instruments were in full flight. The *tavil* (right and left hand) was relatively easy apart from the odd accent here and there. The time signatures change unexpectedly on several occasions, and the second theme was like an entirely different tune. It seemed very unnatural giving this piece a formal structure because it did not sound as if it was being read from sheet music. Nevertheless, it is definitely a structured piece as there are main themes in which all musicians are synchronized with each other.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Steciurenko - (transcriber) personal interview, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2005.

*Manmadanukku* is, in fact, divided into two principal sections, the first having three distinct patterns (A, B and C), or musical ideas, and the second being built up around a fourth pattern (D). The piece is introduced by the following section, which establishes the drumming pattern of section A. This section is known as the *mohara*, where the percussion plays alone, as a cue for the melody to start.

**Manmadanukku**

The musical score for the *mohara* section of *Manmadanukku* is presented for five instruments: Nadaswaram 1, Nadaswaram 2, Tavil L/H, Tavil R/H, and Jalra. The tempo is marked as 175. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The first three bars show the percussion instruments (Tavil and Jalra) playing a rhythmic pattern, while the Nadaswarams are silent.

Figure 17 - An extract of the *mohara*, the first three bars of *Manmadanukku*

### The structure of the entire piece

The piece proper consists of three main musical phrases or themes A, B, C, in section one, and a fourth, D, in section two. There are two transitions in each section. There are many variations of these four main phrases. There is no melody in the introduction in section one, here the drums set the tempo for the piece.


The structure of the piece around these varied phrases is as follows. Only the *nadaswaram* part has been shown, as this is where the variations between phrases are most obvious. The red lines indicate variations from the original phrase.

#### **Section one -**


Introduction/A A A1 B B1 C A A2/Transition 1/A A3 B B2 C1 A4 A5/  
Transition2

**Manmadanukku - Thematic variations**


**section 1 A**

Nadaswaram 1 


**A 1**

Nadaswaram 1 


**A 2**

Nadaswaram 1 


**A 3**

Nadaswaram 1 


**A 4**

Nadaswaram 1 


**A 5**

Nadaswaram 1 


**B**

Nadaswaram 1 


**B 1**

Nadaswaram 1 

**B 2**

Nadaswaram 1 

**C**

Nadaswaram 1 

**C 1**


Nadaswaram 1 

Figure 18 - Extract of *Manmadanukku* showing variations in phrases from the *nadaswaram* part, section 1.

## Section two -

The structure of section two is as follows:

D D1 D2 D3/Transition 3/D4 D4 D5 D6 D7/Transition 4/D8 D9 D10/ Coda.

*section 2*  
**D**  
Nadaswaram 1

**D1**  
Nadaswaram 1

**D2**  
Nadaswaram 1

**D3**  
Nadaswaram 1

**D4**  
Nadaswaram 1

———— = varied section from original phrase

Figure 19 - Extract of *Manmadanukku* showing variations in phrases from the *nadaswaram* part, section 2.

### Introduction

The role of the *tavil* is to establish the beat and to let the *nadaswaram* players know when to begin their parts. The *tavil* also establishes a beat pattern for the *nadaswaram* players to follow with their own melodic pattern. The rhythmic structure is based on patterns of beats, following the concept of *talam*. *Talam* is a pattern of beats which determines the rhythmical structure of a composition. It plays a similar role to the time signature in Western music. Each composition is set to a *talam*, and as a composition is rendered the percussionists play the pattern repeatedly, marking time as well as enhancing the appeal of the performance.

### Rhythm (Talam)

#### **Section one:**

Pattern (A) and pattern (B) are based on *Kakapadam talam* = 16 beats (4+4+4+4)

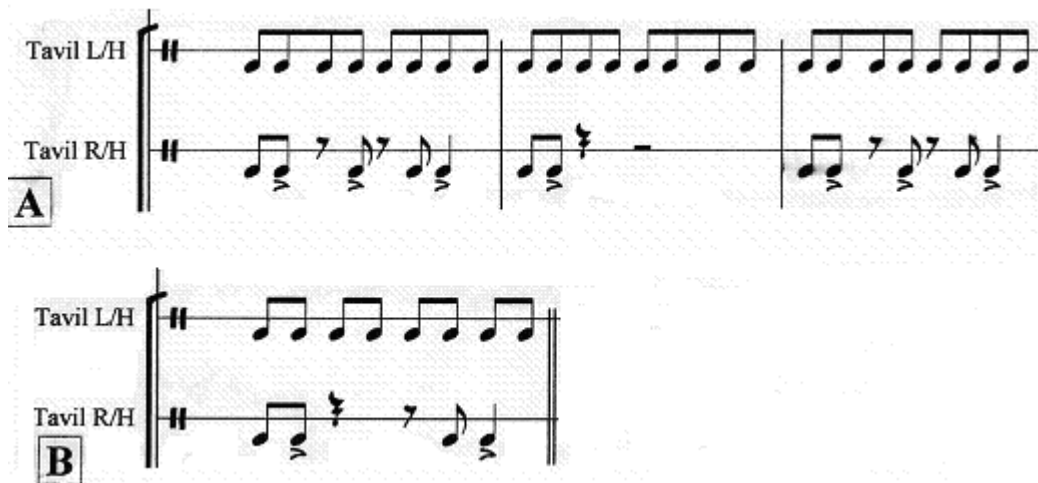


Figure 20 - Examples of pattern (A) and pattern (B)

Pattern (C) of *Manmadanakku* is exceptional because its pattern has 15 beats (4+4+4+3), known as the *Pluta-druta-virama talam*. Here it is used as a signal to the *taval* player to return to pattern (A).

Figure 21 shows an extract of a musical piece, likely a film score, featuring Nadaswaram 1, Nadaswaram 2, Taval L/H, Taval R/H, and Jalra. The extract is divided into three measures. The first measure is labeled 'C' and the second measure is labeled 'A'. In the first measure, Nadaswaram 1 and Nadaswaram 2 play a melody in 4/4 time, with Nadaswaram 1 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5), and Nadaswaram 2 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5). Taval L/H and Taval R/H play a continuous eighth-note pattern (G4-A4-B4-C5-D5-E5-F#5-G#5). Jalra plays a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5). In the second measure, Nadaswaram 1 and Nadaswaram 2 play a melody in 4/4 time, with Nadaswaram 1 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5), and Nadaswaram 2 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5). Taval L/H and Taval R/H play a continuous eighth-note pattern (G4-A4-B4-C5-D5-E5-F#5-G#5). Jalra plays a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5). In the third measure, Nadaswaram 1 and Nadaswaram 2 play a melody in 4/4 time, with Nadaswaram 1 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5), and Nadaswaram 2 playing a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5). Taval L/H and Taval R/H play a continuous eighth-note pattern (G4-A4-B4-C5-D5-E5-F#5-G#5). Jalra plays a dotted quarter note (G4), an eighth rest, a dotted quarter note (B4), an eighth rest, and a dotted quarter note (D5).

Figure 21 - Extract showing the return of pattern (A) after pattern (C).

## Section two:



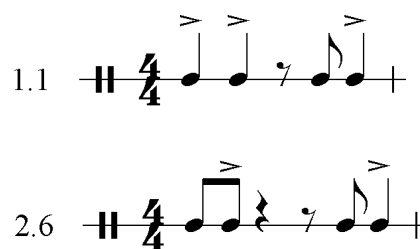
Pattern (D) is based on *Laghu-druta talam* = 6 beats (3+3).



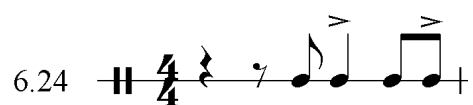
Figure 22 - Extract of pattern D, on *Laghu-druta talam*.

The left-hand *tavil* uses *crescendo* and *decrescendo* in almost every bar, building towards the middle of the bar then holding back. This is, however, very subtle. The right-hand *tavil* makes very strong use of accents throughout and frequently changes its rhythmic patterns. The dynamics of the second theme change into a less frantic and more repetitive, fluid, forward motion while the left-hand *tavil* introduces semi-quavers, and the *nadaswaram* builds on the melody. The *jalra* maintains a very simple strike rhythm, with slight changes between sections.

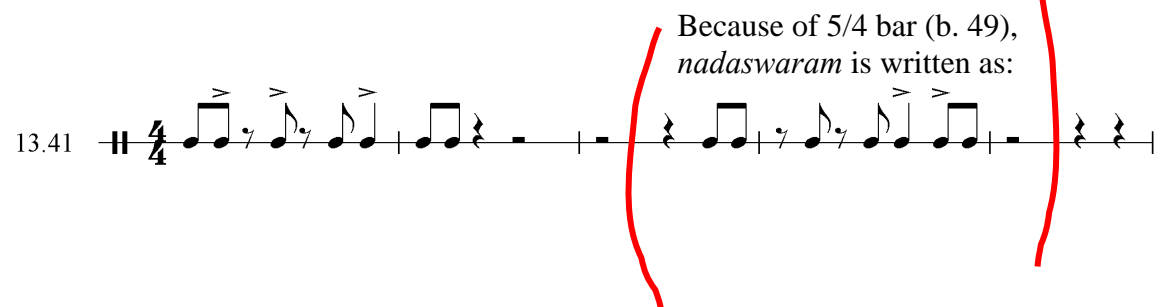
Right hand *tavil* patterns shown with the pattern number (first number), followed by the bar number (second number):



Leads to new melodic phrase B:




To transition:



To C:

14.56 

15.58   $\frac{3}{4}$  bar link to A


16.59 


Note displacement of previous rhythm by a crotchet

[illegible]

18.74 

D

19.77 

20.85 

21.125 L.H.

[illegible]

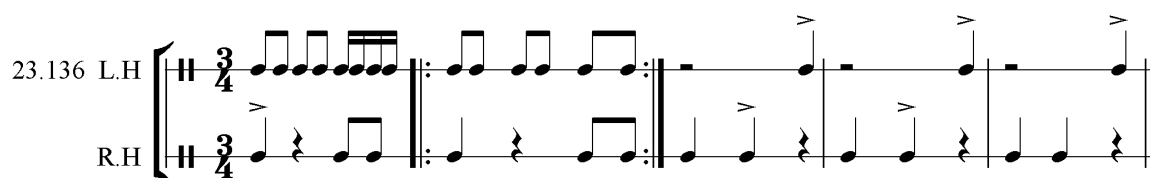


Figure 23 – Extracts showing the wide range of different *tavil* patterns.

The large number of variations in the right hand *tavil* drumming pattern reveals significant features and shows how important the right hand *tavil* is in comparison to the left hand. The quaver to accented crotchet motif is the most outstanding feature of nearly every pattern, but its beat-placement moves in many of the variations. Some of the repeated rhythms do not always repeat in accordance with the melodic phrases of the *nadaswaram* or the 4/4 time, and this causes an interesting juxtaposition between rhythmic pattern and time signature. Also, the anticipation of melodic change is usually shown through a variation in the drumming pattern. In addition, variations are most obvious at significant points in the piece such as the coda.

### **Melody (Ragam)**

The *nadaswarams* are responsible for the melodic line in this piece. Although there is a great deal of repetition throughout, there are many subtle changes all the way through, mostly with *nadaswaram* one and two. *Nadaswaram* one holds the melody throughout the piece, while *nadaswaram* two uses silence at regular intervals and shows some heterophony from time to time, as shown below.



Figure 24 - Extract showing an example of silence being employed by *nadaswaram* two in *Manmadanakku* (bars 68-70)

The piece is based on a B flat tonal centre, but at times this changes to E flat. *Nadaswaram* one improvises on several occasions during the interludes, using harsher tone colours. Also, during some interludes there is no melody at all, leaving the percussion to build the tension alone, as shown below:



Figure 25 - percussion alone (bar 71-73)

Both *nadaswarams* play mostly in unison but in some bars (49-56) they play heterophonically, as shown below.



Figure 26 - *Nadaswarams* playing in unison (bar 45-47)



Figure 27 - *Nadaswarams* playing heterophonically (bar 49-56)

The *nadaswaram*'s parts are also decorated by trills and phrasing. This can be seen in section one (bars 45-61) of the piece, see below, but not in section two. The refined nature of variation in this way reflects the more intensive musical education undertaken by *Brahmin* caste musicians than the lower cast ones.



Figure 28 - Extract showing the use of trills, found only in section one (bar 45-61) of *Manmadanakku*

The other form of decoration is the use of microtonality by both the *nadaswarams*, as shown here from bar 53. The slurring of the chromatic pitches creates this effect of microtonality between the semitones.



Figure 29 - Extract showing the use of microtonality by both *nadaswarams* (bar 53-55)

### Tempo (*Laya*)

The tempo changes a total of three times in the piece, although the last three bars sound more like a *ritenuto* than an actual tempo change. It starts at 175 beats per minute and remains there for the entire first theme. In section two it changes to 150 beats per minute. There are a few differences in the *Brahmin* caste trance induction music and the *Brahmin* caste *tillana padalgal* ('peaceful songs') played during the *puja* at Thaipusam. These differences become evident when *Manmadanakku* is compared with a *puja* piece called *Ramanakku* (Song for Lord Rama). In this comparison, the *puja* piece was dominated by the melody, giving it the feel of a relaxed session where the *nadaswaram* players get to show off their skills. There is no constant drumming throughout the *puja* piece - this is to give the *nadaswarams* the spotlight. The *puja* piece also has a constant tempo, set at one hundred fifty beats per minute throughout the piece. *Manmadanakku* is an ideal piece to be played at the *Brahmin kavadi* ritual due to the fact that this piece involves more drumming (which is a key factor for trance induction, also evident in the other caste's *kavadi* music) than the *Brahmin* caste *puja* pieces.

## 6.2 *Kshatriya*

The *Kshatriya* caste music is very different from the *Brahmin* caste music, which traditionally follows a very strict regime of musicianship. In the *Kshatriya* style of musicianship, having musical manuscripts to learn from is not necessary. Also, it is not compulsory for musicians of this caste to begin learning at a very young age – they can begin at any time.

The *Kshatriya* caste music differs from that of the *Brahmin* caste in the instruments each caste uses. The *Kshatriya* caste also differs in that they are the only caste that uses singing (*sahityam*) for the melodic line, instead of *nadaswaram* as the *Brahmins* do. “It is said every *Kshatriya* caste man is born as a singer, the singer of the *Kshatriya* caste music group is considered an everyday man and is normally a highly respected member of the group”.<sup>95</sup> Musicians in this caste use the *tavil* and *urumi melam* for drumming, with singing replacing the melodic role of wind instruments. *Salangai* is used as the drone by *Kshatriyas* as the *jalra* is used by *Brahmins*.

From observation, there is great deal of improvisation in the music of the *Kshatriya* caste at the Malaysian Thiapusam festivals. The musicians rely more on improvisation and day to day practice in preparation for the festival. The music played is commonly known and musicians may add or miss parts according to their preferences or feelings at the time.

### **6.2.1 *Munthi Munthi* (Song for Lord Ganesh)**

*Munthi Munthi* (in Tamil), “Song for Lord Ganesh”, is the most popular and most frequently played song in the *Kshatriya kavadi* ritual and can be considered as

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<sup>95</sup> Sivabalan Batumalay, personal interview, Kuala Lumpur, 2005.



very representative of *Kshatriya kavadi* music. This song is played by one *tavil* player, one *urumi melam* player, one *salangai* player, and is accompanied by a singer. A high quality, studio recording of this song was transcribed (Appendix III) for the study of *Kshatriya* caste music. The piece is set to a whole tone scale, which has a tonic 'A' and a decorating note of 'A' sharp. *Munthi Munthi* is divided into four musical ideas, the first being (A B A C), the second being (A B A D), the third being (E F) and the fourth being (A B A). It is introduced by the following section, which establishes the singing then the start of the first (A) of the first theme. There is heavy reliance on the refrain (A), returning to it many times throughout the piece.

**Munthi Munthi**

♩=140  
Intro freely

The musical score for 'Munthi Munthi' is presented in a four-staff format. The top staff is for Salangai, the second for Taval, the third for Urumi Melam, and the bottom for Voice. The time signature is 6/4 for the first two bars and 4/4 for the third. The tempo is marked as 140. The introduction is marked 'freely'. The lyrics are 'Mun-thi mun-thi' and 'vin-a-ya-ga'.

Figure 30 - Extract showing the first three bars of *Munthi munthi* starting in sextuple time.

The piece starts freely with an introduction in 6/4 time. In each bar of the introduction the percussion is silent while the words are sung. The lyrics are followed by a percussion pattern of two beats, and this is repeated until the first musical idea starts in 4/4 time. The following is the structure of the entire piece.

| Tempo                | Theme & Bar No.   | Voice   | Tavil  | Urumi Melam   | Salangai   | Comments                         |
|----------------------|-------------------|---|--|---|--|----------------------------------|
| $\text{♩} = 140$ 6/4 | Introduction      | Singer begins the piece                           | Silent while lyrics are sung, follows lyrics with short beat pattern.  | Silent while lyrics are sung, follows lyrics with short beat pattern.                               | Silent while lyrics are sung, follows lyrics with simple strikes.  |                                  |
| $\text{♩} = 170$ 4/4 | A B A C<br>7 - 28 | Simple melody. Silent in bars 19-22               | Repetitive rhythm of triplets, with an accent on the first of each set.  | Simple rhythm based on stikes and rests   |  |                                  |
|                      | A B A D<br>29-52  | Simple melody. Silent in bars 41-43 and in bar 46 | Continues repetitive rhythm as above, except in bar 46 where there are two strikes per beat instead of three, the first of which is shorter. | Simple rhythm based on stikes and rests, except in bar 46 where it matches the rhythm of the tavil. | Begins A with one beat then rest, bar 8 starts rhythm of four beats per bar with accent on the first beat. Continues this pattern til bar 67 | Change from 4/4 to 2/4 in bar 43 |
|                      | E F<br>53-66      | Continues with simple melody as above.            | Continues repetitive triplet rhythm til bar 67.  | Continues simple rhythm til bar 66, where the beats shorten before bar 67.                          |  |                                  |
|                      | A B A<br>67-84    | Singing ceases at bar 81.                         | In bar 67 the beats are held longer, and there is a rest after the first beat. Triplet rhythm continues til the end.                         | Continues simple rhythm til the end.  | Rests for latter half of bar 67, then continues 4 beat pattern til it ceases at the first beat of bar 84.                                    |                                  |

Table 2 - The structure and analysis of *Munthi Munthi*

The piece has a regular quadruple metre or pulse and this changes only once in the entire piece, in bar 43 (when there is the change from pattern A to pattern D), see below.

3 In time

Mun - thi mun - thi vin - a - ya - ga

Figure 31 - Extract showing the quadruple time of *Munti Munthi*, in which the majority of the piece is set

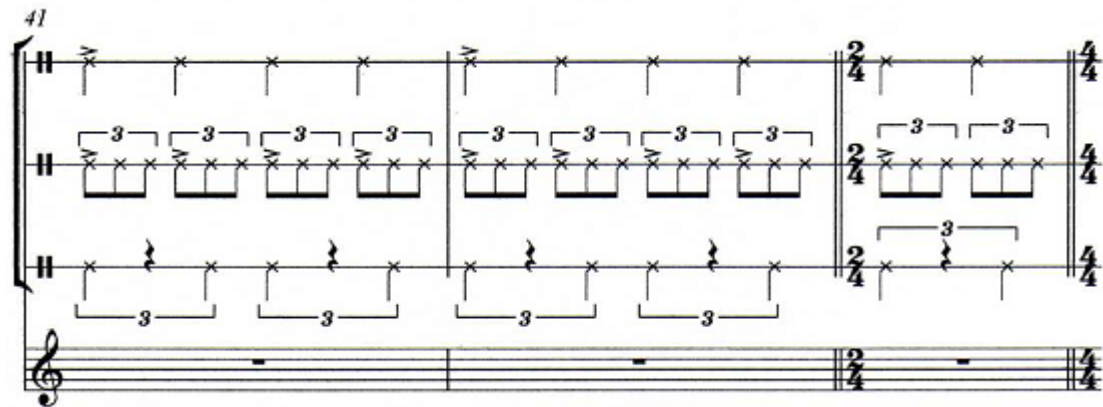


Figure 32 - Extract showing the change from quadruple to duple grouping in bar 43.

### Melody and lyrics

The role of singers of the *Kshatriya* caste is to produce the melody. The singers practice the songs prior to the festival, but usually would have knowledge of them anyway, as they are popular devotional songs. The melody is relatively simple, not ranging into octaves which would strain the voice of an untrained singer. This piece does not have the melodic range of *Manmadanakku* - it is much narrower, featuring mainly five notes of the whole tone scale. Singers can adjust the melody to suit their abilities, and they can also improvise according to their own tastes and those of the musicians they are with. For example, they can repeat a line of the song as many times as they choose, and they can even omit lyrics. This demonstrates the casual nature of the singing in the *Kshatriya* caste music at the Thaipusam festival.

**B**

tan - ma - ta - nar      Kan - ta - nuk - ku      min - pi-run thae

Figure 33 - Extract showing the simple melody of *Munthi Munthi*, this style is sustained throughout the piece

The lyrics of the songs sung by the *Kshatriya* caste at the Malaysian Thaipusam festival are always addressed to the lords or gods the devotee is offering to, usually calling on them to bestow favour on the devotee, or praising the lord or god. The lyrics of *Munthi Munthi* as they are in Tamil and the translation in English follow.

### **Lyrics of *Munthi Munthi* - Tamil**

*Munthi munthi Vinayaga*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar (2X)*

*Kanttanakku minpirunthae Ganapathiyae varumiya*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar*

*Athaegarai orama evaluvae nerama*

*Kachiya katungae Vinayaga, kachiya katungae Muniswara (2X)*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar*

*Kanttanakku minpirunthae Ganapathiyae varumiya*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar*

*Gaja gaja endru gaja Muni ni adae (2X)*

*Kachiya katungae Vinayaga, kachiya katungae Muniswara (2X)*

*Tanipolae Ganapathi yae vendigittue vendigittu! (2X)*

*Kasi paruntheriea malaiyitum, nangae*

*Kasi paruntheriea malaiyitum*

*Ganapathiyae Ganapathiyae endru sol la (2X)*

*Nangae kasi paruntheriea malaiyitum (2X)*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar*

*Kanttanakku minpirunthae Ganapathiyae varumiya*

*Munthi munti Vinayaga mukkanar tanmatanar*

### **Lyrics of Munthi Munthi - English**

Oh dear Lord Ganesh

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one (2X)

Come bless us, the big brother of Lord Muruga

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one

We are waiting here by the river all day long

Come show us your grace Lord Ganesh, show us your face as fierce as Lord

Muniswara (2X)

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one

Come bless us, the big brother of Lord Muruga

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one

Dance your way into devotees like Lord Muniswara (2X)

Come show us your grace Lord Ganesh, show us your face as fierce as Lord  
Muniswara (2X)

We will have you in our heart all day Lord Ganesh! (2X)

We will climb the stairs to give you your gift,

Like climbing the stairs of *Kasi* hills,

While saying Lord Ganesh, Lord Ganesh in our hearts (2X)

We will climb the stairs to give you your gift,

Like climbing the stairs of *Kasi* hills, (2X)

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one

Come bless us, the big brother of Lord Muruga

Oh dear Lord Ganesh the forgiving one.<sup>96</sup>

### **Rhythm**

In the piece *Munthi Munthi*, the rhythm is produced by the percussion instruments – the *tavil*, the *urumi melam* and the *salangai*. The drumming is constant throughout the piece from the first (A) pattern of the first musical idea to the last (A)

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<sup>96</sup>Lyrics translated by the author from music source by Gunasegaran, M. Producer. *Mahamuni Urumi Melam*. (SM ACD: 1005), Ramiy Records, 2002.

pattern in the fourth musical idea. The singer and the drummers of the *Kshatriya* caste are very much attuned to each other. This is due to the fact that in many cases, the musicians of any one group have performed or played together so often that they develop an empathy in their playing. In this piece, this relationship can be seen in the way the drummers take the lead from the singer, following his words with their drumming in the introduction. This pattern of the drummers following the singer is found in all songs from the *Kshatriya* caste. The songs of the *Kshatriya* are defined by two main characteristics. The first, as shown above, is the pattern of the drummers following the singer at the beginning of the song. The second characteristic is the constant drumming, which is the same throughout the piece from after the introduction till the end of the song.

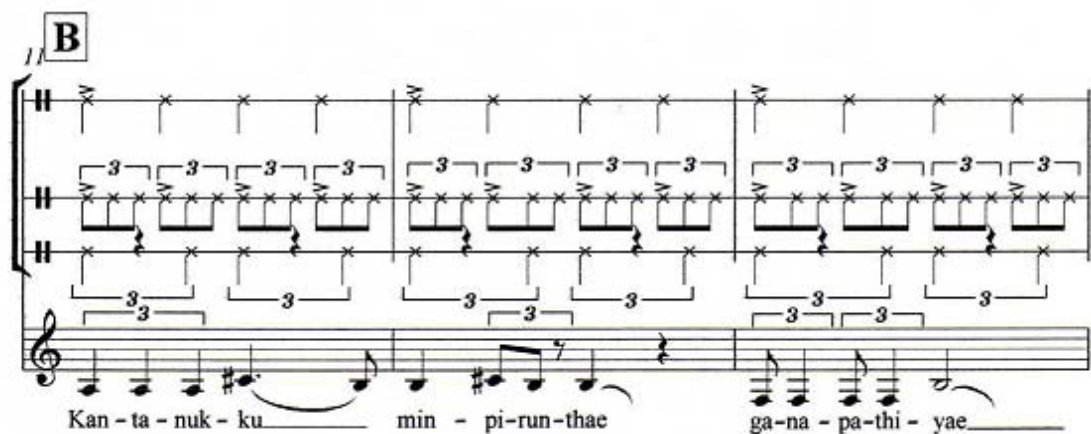


Figure 34 - Extract showing the drumming pattern in *Munthi Munthi*, which is constant throughout the majority of the piece

In comparison to *Manmadanakku* apart from the introduction, bar (46) and the anticipation of the return to pattern bar (66) at the end, there are only two drumming patterns on the *urumi melam*. The *tavil* has a continual triplet pattern.

#### *Urumi Melam*

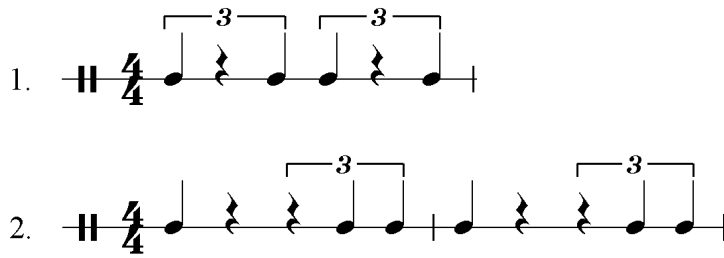


Figure 35 The two principal rhythmic patterns of *Munthi Munthi*

### 6.3 *Vaishya*

With the lower castes, beginning with the *Vaishyas*, the emphasis in the music is on rhythm, without the melody of the *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* castes. The main instruments used by the *Vaishya* caste are the *tavil* and *urumi melam* drums, with *kombu* and *salangai* accompanying.

Because the music of this caste does not consist of set songs, the musicians are much freer to use improvisation while playing. At the Malaysian Thaipusam festivals, it is not unusual for *Vaishya* musicians to play repetitive drumming loops for five to thirty-five minutes. A studio quality recording of an example of a *Vaishya* piece was transcribed (Appendix IV) and used for the study of this caste's style of music.

#### 6.3.1 *Namana Orrou Urumi Melam* (Our Country's *Urumi* Music)



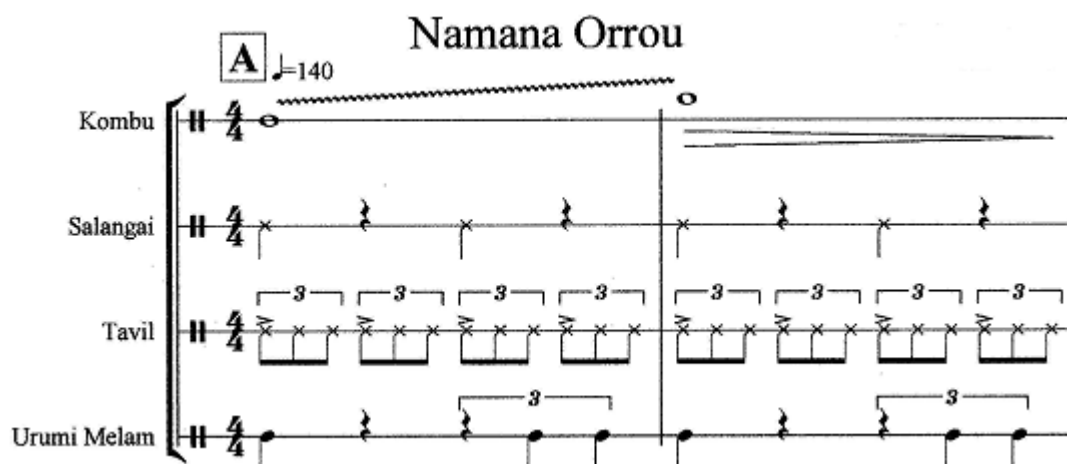


Figure 36 - Extract showing the first three bars of *Namma Orru Urumi Melam*

The structure of drumming in this piece is broken down into six drum loop sections, identified as A B C D E F. These set drum loops can be played as a cycle from A straight through to F, or as a mix of these sections but always starting from A. As mentioned earlier, the combination of these cycles can be played repetitively from five to thirty five minutes. As there are no strict rules for musicianship in this caste at Thaipusam, the musicians have the choice of how they arrange the loops and how long the song should be played, this is determined by the musicians mood and the devotees trance state.

The drum loop pattern A establishes the song, in which all instruments play simultaneously till the fourth bar. The *kombu* in *Namma Orru Urumi Melam* creates its shrill, wavering sound in the first half of section A, in section D, and also on the third beat of section F. The purpose of this is to create a release from the monotony of the percussion.<sup>97</sup>

The *salangai* keeps a very simple rhythm, playing either on beats one, two, three and four of the bar, or on beats one and three of the bar, as in section E - see below. The *tavil* keeps a constant rhythm of quaver triplets throughout the piece, with

<sup>97</sup> Paul Steciurenko.

slight variations in section B and E. These quaver triplets are also evident in the example given of *Kshatriya* caste music (as shown above). The dominant instrument in this piece is the *urumi melam*, with its use of triplets – especially in section B.

The majority of this piece is in 4/4 time, except for one bar in section E where it changes to 2/4 time, and then back to 4/4 (see below).

The image shows two systems of musical notation for section E. The first system is in 4/4 time, and the second system is in 2/4 time. The instruments are Kombu, Salangai, Taval, and Urumi Melam. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including triplets and muted notes (marked with 'x').

**System 1 (4/4 time):**

- Kombu:** A single note on the first beat.
- Salangai:** A single note on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a single note on the third beat.
- Taval:** A triplet of eighth notes on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a triplet of eighth notes on the third beat.
- Urumi Melam:** A triplet of eighth notes on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a triplet of eighth notes on the third beat.

**System 2 (2/4 time):**

- Kombu:** A single note on the first beat.
- Salangai:** A single note on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a single note on the third beat.
- Taval:** A triplet of eighth notes on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a triplet of eighth notes on the third beat.
- Urumi Melam:** A triplet of eighth notes on the first beat, followed by a triplet of eighth notes on the second beat, and a triplet of eighth notes on the third beat.

Figure 37 - Extract from *Namma Orru Urumi Melam* showing the rhythm of the *salangai* on beats one and three, and the time signature change from 4/4 to 2/4 and back to 4/4 in section E

In this piece it appears that there is much room for improvisation because the instruments change in different times, again the *urumi melam* changes the most, and the *taval* changes only twice, and it has only two patterns. Various combinations of instruments and their resultant rhythm can be seen as A B C D E and F, all of which are repeated.

## 6.4 Shudra

Music of the *Shudra* caste is much like that of the *Vaishya* caste, in that it is music based on *talams* without *ragams*. Again, unlike the *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* castes, which use *nadaswarams* and the voice for melody as well as drums and other percussion instruments, the instruments used by the *Shudra* caste are minimal and consist only of percussion. The percussion instruments used by this caste are the *tavil* and *tappu*, with *salangai* as the drone and the *sanggu* occasionally accompanying the music. Melody is never used in the music of this caste, even in contexts outside that of Thaipusam. A high quality, studio recording of the drumming beat pattern was transcribed (Appendix V) for the study of *Shudra* caste music in the Thaipusam festival and is again representative of the Shudra music played at Thaipusam

### 6.4.1 *Shudra* drumming sample

**Shudra**

♩ = 140

A

Figure 38 - Extract of the first three bars of a *Shudra* caste drumming pattern, showing the introduction by the *tappu*

The *Shudra* caste drumming style consists of three different patterns, identified as section A, B and C. The patterns can be played straight through, from A to C, or they can start with A with a mix of A, B and C following. The repetitive style of drumming means the piece can last from ten to thirty minutes.

The piece is introduced by the *tappu*, which plays a short staccato beat pattern. This type of introduction by the *tappu* is found in all *Shudra* caste trance induction music (see extract above)

The entire piece is in 4/4 time, with no changes at any stage. The *taval* comes in at the beginning of section B, and employs the same pattern of triplets seen in the *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* castes. The *salangai* comes in at the start of section A and keeps a simple rhythm throughout the piece, using triplets twice in bars six and seven.

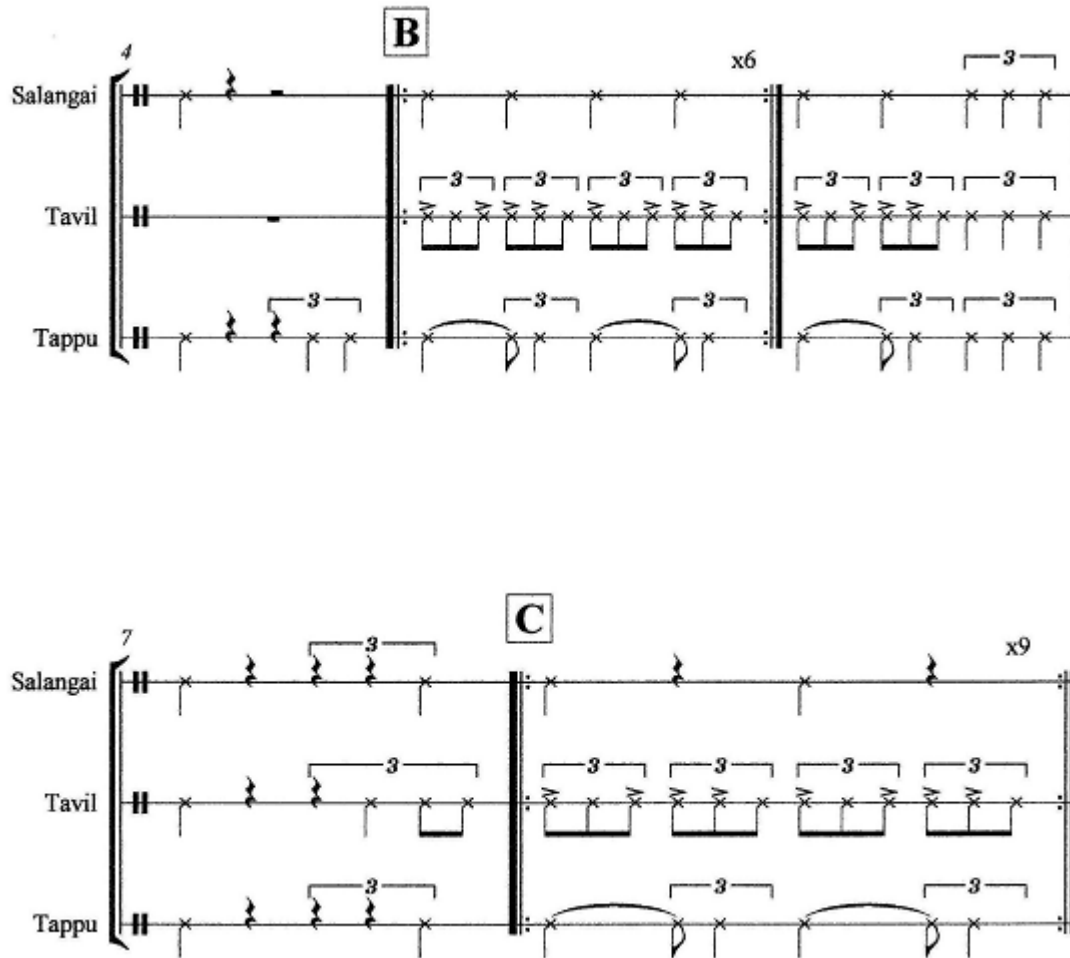


Figure 39 - Extract showing sections (B) and (C), with the use of triplets by the *taval*, and by the *salangai* in bars six and seven

### 6.5 Dalit

Music of the *Dalit* caste is much like that of the *Vaishya* and *Shudra* castes. The music is based purely on rhythmic repetition, without any melodic instruments. The main instrument is the *tappu* drum, and occasionally the *sanggu* accompanies the music. Many *tappu* may be used, from one to five in number. A high quality, studio recording drumming pattern was transcribed (Appendix VI) for the study of *Dalit* caste drumming.

### 6.5.1 *Dalit* drumming sample

#### Dalit

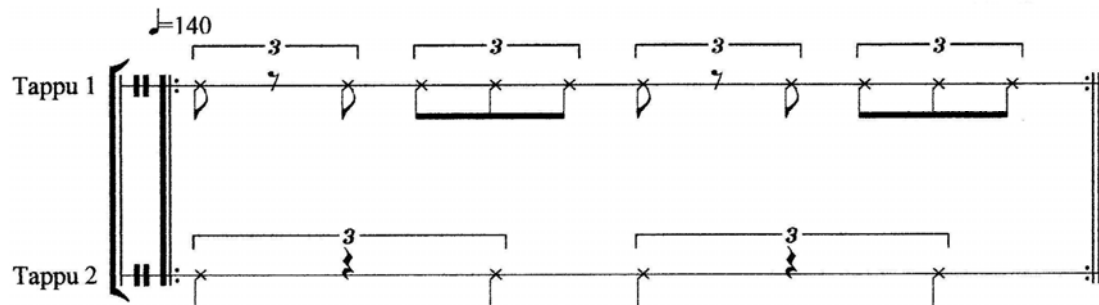


Figure 40 - *Dalit* drumming sample

This drumming sample is in 4/4 time at one hundred and forty beats per minute. This sample is repeated many times over, and can be played for up to thirty-five minutes. The time signature does not change at all. As with the *Kshatriya*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudra* castes, the drums make use of triplets in their rhythm. Judging from observation taken at the 2005 and 2006 festivals, if a *sanggu* is involved with the music at Thaipusam, the player does not adhere to set rules and can sound his instrument at any time he pleases.<sup>98</sup> The rhythm remains simple throughout the entire piece, and features such as crescendo or diminuendo are not employed.

<sup>98</sup> Mulipaden (*sanggu* player), interviewed at the 2005 Thaipusam festival.

## 7. The Future of the Music at the Thaipusam Festival

There have been noticeable and significant developments in the music played at the Thaipusam festival over recent years. Firstly and most importantly, there is more emphasis on styles of music involving a ‘super group’ known as *urumi melam* group made up of members of different castes. These groups can have members from any caste and have been observed playing any caste’s style of music, except that of the *Brahmins*. They have been observed using features of all caste’s music, such as *ragam* and *talam*, singing and drumming but always with an emphasis on drumming. These ‘super groups’ are used by devotees of any caste, including the *Brahmins*, who have no qualms about hiring these musicians.

The ‘super groups’ use any instruments, with the exception of the *nadaswaram*, no matter to which caste they traditionally belong. This is illustrated by the use of the *tavil*, which can even be played by a musician of low caste when in these groups. Nor do the musicians have to adhere to the traditional method of playing their instruments. At the 2006 festival, a musician in one of these groups was seen playing a *tavil*, beating it with the flat of both hands, instead of the traditional way of playing it with the fingers and a bamboo stick. In the super groups the style of music is simplified, meaning that anyone of any caste is able to join the group and would not have difficulty learning the music. These groups usually consist of a group of friends and are not formed specifically for playing at Thaipusam.

Secondly, music played loudly through the speakers has totally replaced groups playing live music in the procession from the stairs to the temple in the cave. The music played over the speakers is still popular Tamil devotional music and hymns, with an emphasis on drumming and chanting. It has not yet reached the stage where popular, non-religious music is played over these speakers and it is unlikely

that the Hindu community at Thaipusam will ever accept such songs, as many have strongly expressed their views against this. A *Brahmin* Hindu priest, Naatukodi Iyer, expressed such a view at the 2005 Thaipusam festival when asked what would happen if live music was not a feature at the festival – “It will never happen. The music is going to be there all the time.”<sup>99</sup> In the same year, another *Brahmin* Hindu priest, Maanmuthi Iyer, expressed a similar view that Thaipusam might continue without musicians playing live, but would always have the presence of devotional music. The festival would continue “without musicians maybe, but not without music and devotional songs.”<sup>100</sup> This shows the importance of music at Thaipusam, and even though the styles and structure of groups may change, there will always be an element of Hindu devotional music to assist in trance and worship.

Thirdly, in the future, hostility towards Thaipusam’s lower caste musicians is likely to increase due to the “Sanskritization”<sup>101</sup> of the festival by the Malaysian Hindu Sangam. The term “Sanskritization” describes an attempt, led by mainly *Brahmin* religious leaders, to bring religious Hindu rituals and practices into line with the traditional Sanskrit scriptures. The “Sanskritization” of Thaipusam has seen the banning of a number of practices traditional to castes below the *Brahmins*. As a result of the abolition of these practices, the lower castes have lost part of that which defines and identifies them at the festival, and the castes now appear to be very similar in their rituals. The Malaysian Hindu Sangam frequently makes changes to keep the Hindu practices at Thaipusam as “civilized” as possible. This is primarily to please the Malaysian general public which is predominantly Muslim, and also because the

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<sup>99</sup> Naatukodi Iyer, Brahmin Hindu priest, personal interview at the Thaipusam festival, Kuala Lumpur, 2005.

<sup>100</sup> Maanmuthi Iyer, Brahmin Hindu priest, interviewed at the 2005 Thaipusam festival.

<sup>101</sup> [www.Malaysianhindusangam.com.my](http://www.Malaysianhindusangam.com.my) data downloaded April 2007.



festival attracts many Western tourists from different nations, such as Australia, the United States and Europe.

Fourthly, there have been many noticeable changes which have affected some traditions at Thaipusam, such as the labeling of the musicians as a “public nuisance”, and the banning of traditional customs such as animal sacrifice to the gods (practised by all castes below *Brahmin*). The type of *kavadi* known as *parakam kavadi* (‘flying *kavadi*’), or sometimes known as ‘superman *kavadi*’ has also been banned at the instigation of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam. The *parakam kavadi* involves the *kavadi*-bearer being suspended horizontally on poles and carried by friends. This was a very popular *kavadi* of the *Kshatriya* caste.<sup>102</sup>

A number of traditional *Sudra* and *Dalit* practices have also been banned. The practice of slicing the tongue open and letting the blood pour out of the mouth as an offering to Kali, or the smearing of *kum kum* (red powder) on the body and face in imitation of the angry Kali have both been banned completely by the Malaysian Hindu Sangam. To smear the red powder on the tongue is seen as a blasphemy, as this sort of imitation of Kali is an indication that the person has decided for themselves, without spiritual guidance from a priest or the like, that they are especially close to the goddess, or are being possessed by her. This view is stated by P. Samy, caretaker of a Kali temple in Kuala Lumpur, and quoted in ‘*The Real Meaning of Thaipusam*’ - “What right do these people have to actually claim and show off that god is in them? Not only does it give Hinduism a bad name but it is also a serious case of blasphemy.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Nallamah Ramasamy, Tamil school teacher, interviewed 2006.

<sup>103</sup> Wani Muthiah, *The Real Meaning of Thaipusam*, taken from *The StarOnline*, February 9, 1998 .

The attempts of the *Sudra* and *Dalit* castes to introduce non-Indian instruments, such as the Afro-Caribbean bongo drums, into the 1998 festival was seen as the musicians going too far, and has never been allowed to occur again. “Honorary secretary G Gopallakrishna of the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple Dhevasthanam which manages the Batu Caves temple, a popular Thaipusam venue in Selangor, agrees that many practices which are unrelated to Hinduism take place during the festival. “We are trying our best to keep out deviationist practices and have so far banned whips, rotans, parangs and bongos from the temple perimeters”.<sup>104</sup> Some musicians in 2006 argued that occurrences such as these are what have caused even the more traditional aspects of Thaipusam, for example the musicians ascending the stairs to the temple while playing their instruments, to be banned and labeled as a ‘public nuisance’.

The weakening of the caste system in Malaysia may also bring about further changes to the festival. Currently, caste is noticeable as a basic social structure mainly in religious contexts and at major life events such as marriage and funerals. As Hindus are a minority in Malaysia, the caste system has had to adapt to a more mixed, multi-cultural environment. For example, the highest positions in politics and employment are no longer solely reserved for members of the higher castes – there is equal opportunity for members of all castes. In religious situations, the different castes each still have their own rules and rituals, as can be seen at Thaipusam. However, there is also evidence of the caste system weakening at the festival. The existence of ‘super groups’ of mixed caste musicians show that musicians no longer feel restricted to play exclusively with, or for, members of their own caste. Also, some *Shudra* and *Dalit* musicians were observed playing the *tavil* and *urumi melam*

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

as part of a 'super group' at the 2006 festival. Members of these castes are beginning to avoid using the *tappu*, as to be seen using this instrument would mark them as being a 'low' member of Hindu society. In the future, it is likely that these groups of mixed caste musicians will become more common, perhaps even more so than groups of musicians from a single caste.

## Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that live music, especially drumming, and devotion to the Hindu faith are the most important factors necessary for the trance induction of *kavadi* bearers at the Malaysian Thaipusam festival. Observation at these festivals in Malaysia has shown that other factors are also important, such as preparatory fasting and abstention from sex and alcohol, and also environmental factors leading to an over-stimulation of the senses such as incense smoke, and the sight of many bright and religiously significant colours worn by people attending the festival. However, trance has been observed in people who were not under the influence of these secondary factors, showing that music and Hindu faith are more necessary than the secondary factors. Despite its importance for trance induction, it becomes clear then that music alone cannot induce trance in the devotees.

Of all the many different musical instruments used at the festival, it is obvious that the drums are the most important for trance induction. The most likely point for the devotee to reach an '*arul*' state of trance, occurs when faster rhythms, more frequent repetitions, and more intensive drumming are featured and are directed towards a devotee. This is also evident in the trance induction training sessions where devotees seek a Hindu priest or guru's guidance while preparing for the *kavadi* ceremony. Here, difficult cases are brought into a trance with an increase in the volume of the music and the frequency of the beat. Acceleration of tempo, an increase in volume, and repeated rhythms are all aspects of Thaipusam drumming which tip devotees over the threshold into trance. Sustained drumming in this manner has also been found to keep the devotee in a deep trance state.

The study of music from each caste shows that there are many similarities between them, the most obvious being the instruments that are used. All castes

depend heavily on drumming in their music. However, the music of the lower castes, *Shudras* and *Dalits*, features a greater emphasis on repetitive drumming, which often results in a wilder and deeper state of trance for the *kavadi* bearer for whom it is played. The music of the higher castes, especially that of the *Brahmin* caste, is more melodic as it makes use of wind instruments such as the *nadaswaram* as well as featuring rhythmic drumming. The *tavil* is used by all castes except the *Dalits*, the *urumi melam* by the *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya* castes, and the lower castes - the *Shudras* and *Dalits* – both make use of the *tappu*. The use of triplets can be seen in every piece shown, although the *Brahmin* caste piece does not rely on them as much as the other castes do. All pieces are either in triple meter, or, as with the *Brahmin* caste piece *Manmadanakku*, in quadruple meter changing to triple meter.

The study also shows a high correlation between the caste and its music refinement. The higher the caste, then the more complex the music is. This is evident in the twenty-three drumming patterns heard in the one *Brahmin* piece, which also has the melodic instruments, the *nadaswaram*, a clear sectional structure and melodic variations and heterophony. In the next lower caste there is only simple singing in verse-refrain structure with only two significant drumming patterns. In the music of the next lower caste, the *Vaishyas*, there are seven different drum patterns but no true melody except for blasts on the *kombu*. In the lowest two castes, the *Shudras* have only three, very similar, drumming patterns with *sanggu* blasts and the *Dalits* have repetitive drumming of basically only one pattern.

Setting and state of mind are also important factors for trance induction. When the devotee accepts what is going on around them due to their religious beliefs, faith, and family background, they fall into a trance more easily, with the aid of the music. If the devotee does not have the right mindset for trance induction at the festival, they

will not fall into a trance. It is for this reason that the trance induction ceremony does not affect Muslims attending the festival.

As the structure of the caste system weakens within the Hindu society in Malaysia, the differences in the music of the castes will slowly disappear. The weakening of the caste system and Hindu culture in general in Malaysia, may be due to the minority Hindus naturally adapting to life in a country where the majority consists of Malays and Muslims. A result of this will be that the music of the castes will start to blend together and will increasingly follow popular trends, leaving tradition behind. The beginnings of this can already be seen in the formation of 'super groups' of musicians of different castes. Some changes have already taken place in the recent past, such as the banning of animal sacrifice. This is evidence that the festival has diverged from its origins in South India, as the Hindus in Malaysia must adhere to the rules of a different country. Ongoing change to the festival, such as the growth or decline of the 'super group', provides material for further study.

It is the live music, directed at devotees at Thaipusam, that is important for trance induction, rather than music played over loud speakers. Live music played specifically for a *kavadi* bearer can be adjusted according to his or her needs. With live music features, such as beat frequency and volume, can be altered if the *kavadi* bearer appears to be falling out of an '*arul*' trance state into a lighter state. General devotional music played over loud speakers, although necessary for creating the right religious atmosphere at the festival, cannot be adjusted according to a single devotee's needs, and for this reason it cannot take the place of live music at Thaipusam - an aspect of the festival which will always be necessary.

Most importantly then, the survival of Thaipusam, as a devotional festival, is to a large extent dependent on the maintenance of its live music and continued support and education for the musicians who perform it.

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Rajathurai, Yogandran. *Thaipusam 2006*, Tape 1. Amateur video recording. Kuala Lumpur, 2006 .

- Departure of the *Ratham* (the silver chariot carrying the image of Lord Muruga and four priests) and flagpole from the Sri Maha Mariamma temple, Kuala Lumpur, on the eve of the *Thaipusam* festival.
- Loud *thevaram* music (Hindu devotional music), played from speakers inside the chariot. These devotional songs are for the Lord Muruga.
- The morning of the first day of *Thaipusam*, before the ceremony officially begins with the raising of the flag, called *kodi ethrem*.
- *Salangai* – ankle bells worn by men getting ready for a *kavadi* ritual.
- View of the new gold-plated Lord Muruga statue which was built in 2006.
- Hair shaving as an offering to Lord Muruga, before the procession with the *kavadi*.
- The *Ratham* chariot has arrived and parked in a space below the cave temple. The image of Lord Muruga has been removed to be bathed in the river, then taken up to the temple in the caves
- Footage of the Batu Cave River and musicians practising for the festival procession, waiting for devotees to join them.
- Footage of middle-aged ladies after trance induction.
- The beginning of the festival with many people bearing *kavadi* and music being played all around, between the river and the stairs to the Batu Caves.
- Close-up recording of different groups of *Thaipusam* musicians and the instruments they use.
- Trance induction by the Batu Cave River, includes *kavadis* of all different castes.

Rajathurai, Yogandran. *Thaipusam 2006*, Tape 2. Amateur video recording. Kuala Lumpur, 2006 .

- *Thaipusam* musicians playing for free (jamming) by the Batu Cave River to attract devotees who might need them to induce trance.
- Footage following a group of *Shudra* caste devotees accompanied by *Thaipusam* musicians from the river to the gate of the temple complex.
- The stopping point at the start of the stairway, where the musicians had to remain behind and let the *kavadi* pass alone to the temple in the caves.
- Views of very large crowds waiting to go up the stairs to visit the cave temple.

Rajathurai, Yogandran. *Thaipusam 2006*, Tape 3. Amateur video recording. Kuala Lumpur, 2006.

- *Kavadis* going up the steps to the temple without the musicians, just bells and chanting.
- Tired *kavadi* bearers resting on the stairs leading to the cave.
- Inside the cave temple with *kavadis* and normal public.
- Devotees coming out of trance at the cave temple, and removing the offerings (*kavadi* and piercings).
- Devotees returning down stairs from cave after removing offerings.

Sivabalan. *Thaipusam 2001, A Mock Ceremony*. Amateur video recording. Kuala Lumpur, 2001. (VHS).

This video recording has distant shots of Brahmin and land owning caste musicians practising before the *Thaipusam* festival. The sound quality is average and the quality

of as is the recording. However, this is a good source for analyzing and comparing the music styles in the *Thaipusam* ceremony. The running time of this tape is twenty minutes.

Lord Muruga's shrine is also paraded.

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| 0.13.35-0.15.00 | Brahmin caste musicians practising.     |
| 0.15.00-0.18.05 | Land owning caste musicians practising. |
| 0.18.05-0.20.00 | Coconut offering to Lord Muruga.        |

Sivabalan. *Thaipusam 2002, Drumming*. Amateur video recording. Kuala Lumpur, 2002. (VHS).

This seventeen minute video recording has the Brahmin, warrior caste, land owning caste and the untouchable caste members playing the drums in the *Thaipusam* festival. Interestingly, there is also footage of untouchable caste members playing Brahmin caste music instruments. The shots are clear, but there are no close-ups of drumming and fingering style. The sound quality of this video footage is average. An additional scene of *kavadi* piercing is included in this video. This is a very important source for analyzing the drumming styles found in the *Thaipusam* festival.

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| 0.00.00-0.03.00 | Warrior caste drumming.                            |
|                 | Land owning caste drumming.                        |
|                 | Untouchable caste drumming.                        |
|                 | Brahmin caste <i>pooja</i> (worship) and piercing. |
| 0.11.30-0.15.00 | Brahmin caste drumming.                            |

Sivabalan. *Thaipusam 2003, The Kavadi Ritual*. Amateur video recording. Penang, 2003. (VHS).

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## Appendix I

### **List of Thaipusam devotional songs by caste**

#### **Brahmin caste**

1. *Vaataapi* (Foremost)
2. *Ramanakku* (Song for Lord Rama)
3. *Manasa-Sree Ramani* (Paradise of Love)
4. *Bajana-Manasa Cheydu* (Offer your heart)
5. *Manmadanukku* (For the handsome one)
6. *Kannonjal* (Beautiful eyes)
7. *Pallle Kall Alumbi* (Pure as milk)
8. *Odam* (Boat in the calm river)
9. *Thodudaya Sevian* (Lord with an earring)
10. *Ainhugarathanai* (Five prayers)
11. *Baktiyall Yaan Unai* (My spiritual gift)
12. *Arohara* (Long live Lord Muruga)
13. *Muruga Muruga* (Song for Lord Muruga)
14. *Prabu Ganapathi* (Lord Ganesh the King)
15. *Veera Vel* (Mighty Lance)
16. *Vaa Muruga Vaa* (Come Lord Muruga come)

**Kshatriya caste**

1. *Ammah Tahyeh* (Mother)
2. *Ohdi Varugirar* (Lord Is Coming)
3. *Johor Mahsai* (Warrior)
4. *Misakkaara Muniyah* (Strength of Lord Muniswaran)
5. *Munthi Munthi* (Song for Lord Ganesh)
6. *Atthalukku* (For Mother Kali)
7. *Mutathu Mihsai* (Rough Moustache - Symbol of Lord Muniswaran)
8. *Adipadhathu* (Drums for the Lords)
9. *Manammah Mariammah* (Lovely Goddess)
10. *Sarvaloga* (King of the universe)
11. *Mayajaleh* (Miracles)
12. *Ohh.Ohh.Vella* (Handsome Muruga)
13. *Kali, Kali, Mahakali* (Vengeance of Kali)

***Vaishya, Shudra and Dalit* castes have no structured songs such as these listed here, rather, they have their own repetitive drumming patterns.**

## Appendix II

**Manmadanukku**

*section I*      ♩=175

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

A

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

A

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra



2

10

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

A

13

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

B

16

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

18

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

21

B

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

24

C

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

4

27 A

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

30

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

33 A

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

36

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

39

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

42

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

*trm*

**A**



6

**A**

45

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

**B**

48

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

50

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

53 **B**

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

56 **C**

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

59 **A**

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

8

62

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

65

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

68

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

The musical score is written for five instruments: Nadaswaram 1, Nadaswaram 2, Tavil L/H, Tavil R/H, and Jalra. The score is divided into three systems, each containing three measures. The first system starts at measure 62, the second at measure 65, and the third at measure 68. Nadaswaram 1 and 2 are in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. Tavil L/H and R/H are in a simplified notation with a double bar line and a vertical line. Jalra is in a simplified notation with a double bar line and a vertical line. A box labeled 'A' is present under the Jalra staff in measure 62. A trill is marked on Nadaswaram 1 in measure 62. A slur is present over Nadaswaram 1 in measure 68.

71

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

74

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

**section 2**

77 D ♩ = 150

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra



10

81 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

85 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

89 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

Detailed description: This musical score is for a 10-measure section. It features five staves: Nadaswaram 1, Nadaswaram 2, Tavil L/H, Tavil R/H, and Jalra. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Measures 81-89 are marked with a 'D' in a box. Nadaswaram 1 and 2 play melodic lines with various ornaments. Tavil L/H and R/H play rhythmic patterns. Jalra provides a steady bass line. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and ornaments.

93 11

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

97 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

101 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

12

105 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

109 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

113 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

117

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

121 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

125 D

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra



14

D

128

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

131

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

Tag

134

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

137  $\text{♩} = 170$  15

Nadaswaram 1

Nadaswaram 2

Tavil L/H

Tavil R/H

Jalra

The musical score is written for five instruments: Nadaswaram 1, Nadaswaram 2, Tavil L/H, Tavil R/H, and Jalra. The tempo is marked as 170 (♩ = 170). The score is in 12/8 time. Nadaswaram 1 plays a melodic line with a slur over the first four measures. Nadaswaram 2 is silent. Tavil L/H plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Tavil R/H plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. Jalra plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents.

## Appendix III

### Munthi Munthi

♩=140

Intro freely

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam

Voice

Mun - thi mun - thi\_ vin - a - ya - ga\_

3 In time

Mun - thi mun - thi vin - a - ya - ga

A

5

roll

roll

muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar Mun - thi mun - thi

2

8

vin - a - ya - ga muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar

11 **B**

Kan - ta - nuk - ku min - pi-run-thae ga-na - pa-thi - yae

14 **A**

va - ru - mi - ya. Mun - thi mun - thi vin - a - ya - ga



17

muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar

20

23 **C**

A - thae - ga - rai o ra - ma e - va - lu - vae ne re - ma

4

25

ka - chi - ya ka tun - gae vin - a - ya - ga

27

ka - chi - ya ka tun - gae mu - ni - swa - ra

29

**A**

Mun - thi mun - thi vin - a - ya - ga muk - ka - nar

32 **B**

tan - ma - ta - nar Kan - ta - nuk - ku min - pi-run thae

35 **A**

ga-na - pa-thi - yae va - ru - mi - ya Mun-thi mun - thi

38

vin - a - ya - ga muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar

6

41

41

42

43

44

**D**

44

45

46

Ga - ja ga - ja en - dru ga - ja mu - ni ni a - dae

47

47

48

49

Ga - ja ga - ja en - dru ga - ja mu - ni ni a - dae



49

ka - chi - ya ka - tun - gae vin - a - ya - gar

51

ka - chi - ya ka - tun - gae mu - ni - swa - ra

53

**E**

Ta - ni po - le ga - na - pa - thi - yae <sup>speak</sup> ven - di - git - tue ven - di - git - tue!

8

55

Ka - si pa - run - the - yae ma - lai - yit - tum nan - gae

57

Ka - si pa - run - the - ri - e - a ma - lai - yit - tum

59 **F**

ga - na - pa - thi - yae ga - na - pa - the - yae en - dru sol - la

61

ga - na - pa - thi - yae ga - na - pa - thi - yae en - dru sol - la nan - gae

63

Ka - si pa - run - the - ri - e - a ma - lai - yit - tum nan - gae

65

A

Ka - si pa - run - the - ri - e - a ma - lai - yit - tum Mun - thi mun - thi

10

68

vin - a - ya - ga muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar

71 **B**

Kan - ta - nuk - ku min - pi-run-thae ga-na - pa-thi - yae

74 **A**

va - ru - mi - ya Mun-thi mun - thi vin - a - ya - ga



77

muk - ka - nar tan - ma - ta - nar

80

82

## Appendix IV

**Namana Orrou**

**A** ♩ = 140

The musical score is organized into three systems, each with four staves. The instruments are labeled on the left: Kombu, Salangai, Tavil, and Urumi Melam. The time signature is 4/4, and the tempo is marked as ♩ = 140. The score is divided into two measures by a vertical line. The first measure contains the main rhythmic notation, while the second measure contains a long, horizontal line, likely representing a sustained sound or a specific performance technique. The notation includes various symbols: vertical lines with flags for Kombu, vertical lines with 'x' for Salangai, vertical lines with 'x' and a tilde for Tavil, and vertical lines with dots for Urumi Melam. Brackets with the number '3' indicate triplets. A legend at the bottom left of the second system states 'x = muted'.

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam

x = muted

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam

x = muted

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam

x = muted

2

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

**B**

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

**C**

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

**D** 3

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

**E**

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

Fill 1

Kombu

Salangai

Tavil

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

4

Fill 2

Kombu

Salangai

Taval

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

**F**

Kombu

Salangai

Taval

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

Kombu

Salangai

Taval

Urumi Melam  
x = muted

## Appendix V

**Sudra**

♩ = 140

**A**

Salangai  $\frac{4}{4}$  x3

Tavil  $\frac{4}{4}$

Tappu  $\frac{4}{4}$

**B**

Salangai 4 x6 3

Tavil 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

Tappu 3 3 3 3 3 3

**C**

Salangai 7 x9

Tavil 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

Tappu 3 3 3 3 3 3

The image displays three musical staves, labeled A, B, and C, for three instruments: Salangai, Tavil, and Tappu. Each staff is written in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 140. The notation includes various rhythmic markings, such as triplets (indicated by a '3' over a bracket) and repeated measures (indicated by 'x3', 'x6', or 'x9'). The staves are arranged vertically, with Salangai at the top, Tavil in the middle, and Tappu at the bottom. The notation for each instrument is distinct, with Salangai using a single line, Tavil using a single line, and Tappu using a single line. The staves are connected by a large bracket on the left side.

## Appendix VI

### Dalit

The musical notation for 'Dalit' consists of two staves, Tappu 1 and Tappu 2, with a tempo of 140. The notation includes triplets and rests.

**Tappu 1:** The staff begins with a double bar line and a repeat sign. It features a sequence of notes and rests. The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The second measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The third measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The fourth measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The staff ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

**Tappu 2:** The staff begins with a double bar line and a repeat sign. It features a sequence of notes and rests. The first measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The second measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The third measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The fourth measure contains a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a quarter rest. The staff ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.